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THE MOSS MYSTERY

CAROLYN WELLS

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BY

CAROLYN WELLS

GARDEN CITY NEW YORK
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THE MOSS MYSTERY

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CHAPTER I

INSIDIOUS MARYBELLE

Different men are of different opinions,
Some like apples, some like inions.

THAT, I hold, is incontrovertible philosophy. How much truer it is, than, for instance, Emerson's dazzling generality, "All the world loves a lover."

But then, what generality *is* true? Yet, far truer than the latter epigram is this simple statement: All the world loves a mystery. And on this rock I build my tale.

I am a living man, and he is a Fictional Detective, but that is the only way in which I radically differ from Sherlock Holmes. We are both wonderful detectives, and I know of no other in our class. We can pluck out the heart of a mystery, unerringly, and with the least possible waste motion. I say this for myself without vanity or conceit. I have no patience with the modesty that deprecates skilled achievement. Even Holmes's "Elementary, really, my dear Watson," is distasteful to me. But the poor man couldn't help

it. His author wrote it about him. Now, I rate my work at its true value, and never underestimate it. Elementary, indeed! As well call the architecture of the Parthenon elementary.

A detective is merely a man who discerns the true and the relevant from a mass of false and unimportant evidence. That is all.

And I always do it. My confidence is founded on never failing experience in the past and no fear of failure in the future. It has always been so. As a child, picture puzzles flew together under my fingers, and little fiddly steel-ring puzzles fell apart in my hands. Charades, riddles, abstruse mathematical problems or tricky fallacies presented to me no difficulties of solution; and now I trust you realize my status as a detective.

My name is Owen Prall, and though that doesn't sound like a detective's name at first, it does, the more you come to think of it. My personal appearance is a little better than average, and though I am not handsome, I like to think I have an air of distinguishment; but this varies, after a chameleonic fashion, with my surroundings. I have a thick mane of hair about the color of apple-sauce. This proves the theory, a true one, that abundance of hair denotes unusual intuitive powers.

Now, as every man has his own pet unful-

filled desire, as some dream of perpetual motion and others of a way to make an omelette without breaking eggs, so I have always longed with the keenest intensity for a certain kind of a case.

To me, cases are cases. While my heart is shocked and sorrowed by a murder, my brain becomes at once awake, with its loins girt and staff in hand, ready for the trail that shall lead straight, or, at least surely, to the criminal.

Yet, though I have tracked criminals by all the hackneyed clues of broken cufflinks, initialed revolvers, footprints and fingerprints, never, until the Great Moss Mystery, did I have the case I wanted, the conditions I had longed for for years; namely: a murder committed in an absolutely inaccessible room. I have read stories based on this plot, but the solution has always been so unsatisfactory—a secret panel or an implausible contrivance of some sort—that my clue-finding fingers fairly itched to tackle a problem like that in real life—and real death.

You must remember, as I said, to me a case is a case, not a human document, though the motive was human enough, God knows, for the Moss murder. And the room was certainly inaccessible to a mortal human being.

I went to Woodshurst on the invitation of its mistress, Marybelle Moss, a widow, whom

I had known something less than a year. She was a cousin of Frank Wesley's wife, and Frank was an old friend of mine, and I liked his wife, and I more than liked the widowed Marybelle.

No, I wasn't a bit in love with her. On the contrary, I was not sure I liked her. But she fascinated me. Marybelle——And by the way, what a funny thing it is, the use of Christian names. Some people you always pick up by their prefix; and then some, though these are rare, you want to call by their first names the moment you meet them. Marybelle was this sort, and it may have been partly due to the pretty name combination. The two names were never spoken separately and it made her sound like some sort of strange new flower. But she wasn't specially like a flower, unless an orchid, nor was she of a new or strange type. Rather, the oldest type of all femininity, older even than Mother Eve.

She was, for I may as well describe her here, a siren; she was almost, but not quite, a vampire. Of exquisite manner, of desperate charm and of a luring, haunting fascination that could only have been excelled in the temperament of the Pied Piper of Hamelin.

Marybelle possessed a very white face, quantities of very auburn hair, gold-glinted, and eyes that are called by such meaningless

names as beryl or hazel. Witch hazel would be better. And now you know all about Marybelle, except her wonderful hands—delicate, inviting hands, that seemed to beckon, even though they lay still.

She had been a widow for about a year and a half, long enough, as widows go now, and the house party for which I was bound, was, I surmised, of the nature of an announcement party. For Marybelle, so Wesley's wife had told me, had wiled her way into the heart of no less a catch than a Belted Earl (I assume the belt) and it was rumored that a second marriage venture would make Mrs. Moss a Countess.

I had only met her in town, and this was my first visit to her home at Barrowsville, a small village within easy motoring distance of New York. The place, I thought, was rather ostentatiously titled Woodshurst, for it was merely a big frame house of the architecture of the early seventies, one of the worst periods America boasts. Square, even cubic, with another smaller cube on top for a cupola. A large rear "extension," and recently added porte-cochère and sun parlor relieved the cubicity but added to the ungracefulness.

And yet, the charm of the hostess permeated the whole place, and I felt, the moment I entered the hall, the lure of Marybelle. The

very blaze of the fires, the flicker of the candles and the scent of the massed flowers, with here and there a burning pastille, all assailed my senses as with the wiles of an enchantress, quite obliterating any impressions that might have been made by the blatant pomposity of the black walnut doors and heavy plaster cornices.

Everything was more or less remodeled. Hardwood floors replaced the pine boards, and electric fixtures had been attached to the great gas chandeliers, so that the effects were as anomalous inside as out. But all was blended and harmonized by the magic of the mistress, and I went to my room, on the third floor, conscious of a distinctly pleasant feeling of anticipation.

I did not see Marybelle until the dinner hour, and then the sudden flash of welcome in her eyes, the greeting smile on her scarlet, sensitive lips and the touch of her warm, vital hands thrilled me as no woman ever had before. No, I insist it was only interest and—well, curiosity. I wanted to study her, for I had never before met just such a woman.

"Mr. Prall," she cried, gaily, "how *darling* of you to come! I was *so* afraid you wouldn't, and I simply *had* to have you. How do you want to be entertained? By a débutante's chatter, or some man-talk? There's a tiny

bit of time before dinner. Oh, here's a man I want you to meet, Geoffrey, Earl Herringdean, Mr. Prall."

I liked his lordship at once. When an English nobleman is a good sort, he's an awfully good sort, and Herringdean was one, it seemed to me.

The débutante was Cissy Carreau, a very young and very Frenchy bit of slenderness, who sat next me at dinner. She proved to be little more than a giggling schoolgirl, and I turned to the lady at my left. She was Miss Field, Marybelle's companion, and she showed just the right combination of vivacity and repression that a companion ought to exhibit. Apparently she was used to it, for the rôle fitted her and required no effort. Mrs. Wesley and Marybelle were the only other women and the men were Herringdean, Wesley, Bellamy and myself.

"Rock" Bellamy, I never knew whether his name was Rockwell or Rockingham or what, was the village cut-up. I don't suppose they called him that, but it tickets him sufficiently for the moment.

The dinner hour was merry, really gay. Being only eight of us, the conversation was general and everybody did his best to entertain and be entertained. Both are exertions for me, as I like best to study people without

bothering to talk or be talked to. And here was an interesting bunch to study. From Marybelle, always predominant, down to little Cissy, piping out her absurd opinions, they were all worthwhile bits of human nature.

The Earl, though quite evidently unaccustomed to American vivacity, was adaptable, and in his big, good-humored way appreciated the quick-fire, up-to-date repartee. And this was fortunate, for after his engagement to Marybelle was announced he was subjected to raillery and jocund toasts that were not always in accordance with his English point of view. But he laughed with the rest and responded easily and appropriately, if not in kind.

After dinner there was bridge. Only four of us played, however, as the newly betrothed pair felt privileged to wander off by themselves, and Frank Wesley wanted to smoke. Miss Field effaced herself, so Cissy Carreau and I played against Helen Wesley and Bellamy.

Yes, I am getting to the story, but the bridge game is of a certain importance, as showing how the veriest trifles blaze trails to great possibilities. Well, I don't care if that is a little mixed as to metaphor, it's true. And you have to give all the necessary data in the body of a mystery story. It isn't fair to

spring a surprise at the end that couldn't possibly have been foreseen by the astute reader. And, too, I'm telling this Moss Mystery story just as it happened. And though it hadn't begun to happen at the time we played Bridge, yet what occurred at the card table had, I think, a great bearing on the theories of solution, at least in the minds of many of us.

It seems Cissy Carreau was psychic. That means that somebody who wanted to hold her hand had told her she had a psychic hand, and that sort of twaddle. But she took it seriously and had dipped into the matters of table-tipping and spirit-rapping more than I should have advised for any eighteen-year-old girl, if I'd had any say on the subject. But Cissy's people thought it cunning and so she went to séances and such things at will. And lately—she told us about this while I was dealing, and I held a card motionless above my own pile till she finished—she had been studying up on *Poltergeist.*

"What's that, for gracious sake?" asked Helen Wesley.

"I know," volunteered Rock. "The ghosts throw things around the room and drag you out of bed——"

"Yes," said Cissy, her eyes shining with a deep tensity, "and they stick pins in you. Oh, hundreds of them! And they roll up your

clothes in bundles and set fire to them! It's perfectly wonderful!"

"You believe in these things, Miss Carreau?" said I, in a tone just sufficiently skeptical to lead her on.

"Oh, yes, I know all about them." And she gave my ignorance a pitying smile. "Why I've read of the world renowned cases. Mary Jobson, you know, she heard raps and knocks all the time, and wonderful music, and things; and the Amherst mystery, Esther Cox, she was marvelous! Why, the control—that's what they call the *Polter* ghost—used to throw lighted matches at her and milk pitchers, and oh, it's *frightfully* interesting! I'm *wild* over it! Think of sitting all alone in a room and have a milk pitcher fly at your head—*Oh!*"

The exclamation was caused by the fact that the little pile of cards I had dealt to Cissy, just then flew up and hit her in the face.

There was no apparent human agency in the matter, they rose in a heap, struck her dainty little turned-up nose and fell back to the table, where they lay quiet.

"Who did that?" cried Helen Wesley, sharply. But no one replied, each looking a little foolishly at the cards.

"It's *Poltergeist!*" exclaimed Cissy in an awe-struck but by no means frightened tone. "I wish they'd do it again."

And again the pile of cards flew up at her, but this time they mostly fell to the floor.

"Have to have a new deal," said Rock Bellamy, as several of the cards lay faced on the floor.

"Oh," cried Cissy, "how can you think of dealing when we may be on the verge of some marvelous revelation! I'm psychic, you know; perhaps we can get into communication with the——"

"Don't!" whispered Helen Wesley. "I—I hate that sort of thing! I—I'm afraid——"

"Nonsense!" broke in Bellamy. "There's nothing to be afraid of, Mrs. Wesley; but there's nothing in it, either. The draft must have done that."

"Draft!" I exclaimed. "Fling those cards about like that! Fiddlesticks!"

But Rock gathered up the cards and gave them to me and I dealt over again. I had almost reached the last card, when again the pile in front of Cissy flew up and darted through the air, landing finally in far corners of the room.

Mrs. Wesley gave a scream and ran out into the hall, seeking her husband. Cissy turned very white, but clenched her psychic hands, determined to go on with the performance.

I saw through it, and though sorry to interfere with Rock's fun, I turned back the

Bridge table-cover and exposed one of those little contrivances sold at "Magic" stores, which consist of a bit of small rubber tubing with a bulb on either end. One bulb, a flat one, was under the table-cover, directly in front of Cissy, and, after the cards were placed, a squeeze, by Rock, of the bulb in his waistcoat pocket expanded the other bulb and sent the cards flying.

Cissy was mad at first, then she became interested in the working of the toy and declared it was more fun than real *Poltergeist,* for it was more tractable and obedient.

But the outcry brought all the others back to the room, and the talk turned to spiritual manifestations. Everybody had some experience to relate that was "positively true," and everybody waited with impatient politeness for the current story to be finished, that he or she might begin a fresh one. I had a corker all ready, and from Lord Herringdean's tense attitude and quivering throat muscles, I knew he, too, was waiting to spring into the first available pause, when, like a bugle call of Taps, Marybelle's clear, sweet voice brought an immediate and tense silence.

"Now this really happened," she said, and the corroborative gesture of her two hands, palms outturned, convinced the most skeptical of us that this indeed would be a true story.

"It happened to my mother," she went on, her hands fluttering like uncertain homing doves, now and then nesting in her lap. Herringdean rose from where he was and went to sit beside her. I like him for that. Good deal of a man, Herringdean.

"Mother was in bed, but not asleep. It was midnight, and though there was no rainstorm, the wind blew fearfully—fearfully —" Marybelle's voice lingered on the words as if loath to continue—"and it was very dark, save when, now and then, the moon came for a moment from behind the wind clouds. And in one of those moments, mother saw a hand." Marybelle held out one white, lovely hand. "A long, strong, sinewy yellow hand. "Before our eyes Marybelle's hand lost its whiteness and looked, I thought, like the hand she told of. "And it seemed to be lying, inert, at the foot of the bed. And then the moonlight went out and it was dark. And mother felt, through the coverlets, the hand, creeping, creeping along her side. Another drift of moonlight showed her the hand, the yellow, strong hand, stealthily coming nearer and nearer—to her throat."

Marybelle's soft hand crept almost to her own lovely throat, and paused as she went on.

"And then it was dark again, and mother felt the hand—felt the awful fingertips on her

chest—on her throat—and felt the nails sink into her flesh. And then a voice whispered, 'Not yet! Oh, not yet!' And there was an awful moan; and the moan turned to a shriek and then to a fearsome wail, and the strong, yellow fingers reluctantly loosed their hold, and removed themselves, one by one—slowly—one by one, till there was left only the little finger—and that fairly burned into her flesh like a live coal. Then with a final shriek the little finger tore itself away, and all was silence. When she could do so, mother screamed, and we rushed in to find her almost crazed with fright. There was a livid burn on her throat, and the scar of it always remained—always remained."

"Always remained," echoed another voice, and I looked up to see Janet Field looking at Marybelle in a spellbound way. Cissy was looking at her, in the same way, and Helen Wesley, and all the men. There was no other way *to* look at her. She had woven a spell. Her low murmuring voice, even more than her weird story had well-nigh hypnotized us.

She smiled now, a long, slow smile, that went round the little circle and seemed to pause at each face like a questioning spirit.

"You believe it, Cissy?" she said, softly.

"Indeed, yes, Marybelle. It was the ma-

terialized hand of a disembodied spirit. An evil spirit—*Poltergeist*——"

"Polter your grandmother!" exploded Bellamy, who couldn't stand everything. "Now, see here, Marybelle—" he had known her from childhood—"my ghost was made of honest-to-goodness India rubber, but we don't want these creepy-crawly ghosts, made of shivers and shrieks! Never again, please!"

"But I know another one." And Marybelle's hands put their pink fingertips together pleadingly.

"My word!" exclaimed Herringdean. "If you do, don't tell it! You froze me stiff with horror with that one! Come and see if you can thaw me out. Come, my Marybelle." He stood before her, very handsome in his pleading.

"Any time, anywhere," she murmured, and with a smile into his eyes that would have turned the head of St. Anthony, she went away with him.

"I know a story——" began Cissy. But Janet Field, in Marybelle's absence, took the helm.

"No, Cissy," she said, lightly, glancing at Helen Wesley's white face, "no more stories tonight. I forbid it. Marybelle's announcement party mustn't be turned into a spookfest. And it's time for supper, anyway."

"Supper, hooray!" cried Bellamy. "Nothing like food to drive away spooks. Mrs. Wesley, come along o' me. A loaf of bread and a jug of wine will bring back the rose of youth to your pale cheeks."

"Saucy boy! Just for that you must give me that bulb trick thing. I'll take it home to little Frank, he'll have lots of fun with it."

"Yes, and get kept in after school! But you may have it. Let the kiddy scare his nurse into fits, if he likes."

Janet Field marshaled us out to the dining room for supper, which was even merrier, for it was less formal, than the dinner. No word was spoken of ghosts or on any subject less gay than love and marriage. The betrothed pair arrived after a time. They were so happy it seemed a shame to tease them, but we did, more or less, for the pleasure of seeing Marybelle pout or storm or look reproachful, each of which she did better than the other.

About midnight, we were all sent to bed, for our hostess said, there were heaps of things planned for the next day, and there must be no sluggards. We scattered, the men going for a short time to the smoking room; and the women, with bedroom candles, pausing for a good-night chat on the stair-landing.

I went up about one o'clock. Spears, the

butler and general major-domo, showed me to my room on the third floor. It was a large, corner front room, well furnished in an old-fashioned way, and exceedingly comfortable. I went to bed, but not for a moment did I dream that the morrow was to bring to me the case I had longed for, the mystery I yearned to solve.

And yet, even as I slept, the Great Moss Mystery transpired.

CHAPTER II

MURDER OR SUICIDE

I WAS wakened in the morning by a sound of knocking. It was not at my own door, so I lay still, lazily wondering who was being so persistently summoned. The knocking continued at intervals and I knew by the sound it was at a door on the floor below, but I could not tell at what room. It seemed, though, to be directly beneath me. I had no idea who occupied the room below mine, but as the knocking was repeated and I heard several voices in confused mumbling, I sat up in bed to listen.

Then, after a sudden tap at my own door, Frank Wesley burst into my room, exclaiming, "Get up, Prall; fling on some clothes and come downstairs. There's something the matter."

He disappeared, and I made a record toilet. Not stopping to shave, but otherwise presentable, I hurried downstairs, to find a group of people at the door of the bedroom just below the one I had slept in.

"It's Marybelle's room," said Wesley, in answer to my inquiring look, "and she won't

answer to knocking or calls. We're afraid she's—she's ill."

I looked at the anxious faces. Helen Wesley, in kimono and cap, huddled against the door of her own room, which was next back, and moaned in fright.

"Keep still, Helen," said her husband; "she's all right. Only overslept. Maybe took a sleeping powder or something, after the excitement of the evening, and its effects haven't worked off."

"She never takes those things, sir." This from a trim maid, who, with a face as white as her apron, stood trembling by.

"Lor' no, sir," and a stout woman in the background put her arm round the girl, "as Vida says, sir, Mis' Moss, she ain't never held to drugses. She allus wakes hersel', long afore she's called. I'm the cook, sir. Vida, she kem runnin' to me, when she couldn't make Mis' Moss let her in. Oh, what *is* to pay?"

"It's a trick," I said sapiently. "Mrs. Moss is doing this to make a sensation, and to fool us into thinking she's asleep. All the time she is sitting on the edge of her bed, chuckling at our scare."

"Oh, do you think so?" and Helen Wesley looked greatly relieved. "Then beg her to stop fooling and open the door. Here comes

Miss Field. You call Marybelle, won't you, Janet?"

"Why? What's the matter?" The girl looked in amazement at the strange scene.

"She won't answer us," went on Helen. "She's joking, you know——"

"Joking!" and Miss Field's brow cleared. "That's like her. But if she's made up her mind not to speak, she wouldn't answer me. You know Marybelle's stubbornness, if she makes up her mind."

"Yes, I do. But this is too bad. If she's tricking us, all right. But she may be ill, or fainted. I don't like it."

Then Helen went close to the door and whispered coaxingly that we were distressed at her silence and please wouldn't she speak to us?

But there was no response.

Cissy Carreau and Lord Herringdean had rooms on the second floor, and almost simultaneously they appeared from their doors. Cissy, having heard a commotion, but not knowing the circumstances, was in fetching negligée, but the Earl was fully and conventionally attired.

"What is it all about?" he asked politely.

We told him, and his face went ashen gray. "Marybelle!" he exclaimed. "She must be ill! She would never chaff us so heartlessly!"

"Yes, she would," cried Cissy. "I know

her! The rogue! She wants us to break in the door, and then see her, sitting up in bed, in a chiffon negligée and rosebuddy cap with her pearl necklace on, laughing at us!"

"Pearl necklace!" exclaimed Miss Field; "she hasn't any."

"Oh, hasn't she?" laughed Cissy. "You know better, don't you, Lord Herringdean?"

The Earl smiled. "How should I know?" he said.

"How should you know!" mocked Cissy. "But I won't tell the secret. Hello, Rock, come and make Marybelle let us in. She's planning a surprise for us, she told me so, and this is the beginning of it. Come, help the good work along."

Rock Bellamy, drawn by the noise we made, came downstairs. He, too, had slept on the third floor, but back, and only waked as the commotion increased.

"What's the matter with you people?" he growled; "can't you let a fellow sleep? What are you trying to do?"

"Get into Marybelle's room," answered Cissy.

"A nice occupation, I must say. If she desired your company in there, she'd doubtless invite you."

"Say something funny, Rock. Make her laugh."

"Yes, do," said Wesley. "I'm getting worried. She's got us all here now—tell her to spring her surprise, whatever it is."

Bellamy leant down, his lips at the keyhole.

Quickly he stood upright. "I smell gas," he said, in a low, curt tone.

The merriment faded from the faces. It had been forced, anyhow, and every one felt that tragedy, not comedy, impended.

"Break down that door!" Rock exclaimed. "Shall I do it?"

"Oh, I don't know," said the Earl, starting forward, "isn't that rather—er——"

"No matter if it is rather! It must be done. What say, Frank?"

Bellamy's burly form was already against the door, but he paused for Wesley's word.

"Why, yes, I suppose so. Can you do it?"

"Not alone," said Rock, after a tentative push. "It's bolted as well as locked. Does Mrs. Moss usually bolt her door, Vida?"

"Yes, sir," stammered the maid; "that is, not always, but sometimes, when she has valuables about. She always locks it, sir."

"Well, it's bolted now, and I'm not going to take chances on this thing being a joke. Smell the gas, Prall."

I leaned to the keyhole, which was covered by a brass guard. This I impatiently pushed aside, and distinctly smelled gas.

"There's something wrong. By all means break down the door, or get in some way, as quickly as possible. Is there any other entrance?"

"No," said Janet Field, coming nearer and leaning down to the keyhole. "Oh, there *is* gas escaping! Get in somehow, do!"

"Shall I call Elmer?" said Mrs. Blum, the cook. "He's a ter'ble strong man."

"Yes, yes, call Elmer, whoever he is," said I. "And call him quick."

Elmer, who was the chauffeur, came, and he and Bellamy together somehow burst the door open. An overpowering volume of gas belched forth, and the women screamed and ran from the doorway.

As everybody fell back, by reason of the suffocating fumes, I held my handkerchief to my face and dashed into the room. I saw at once that the gas came from an open burner on the great center chandelier. I turned it off instantly, noting that no other burner was open.

"Keep out for a minute," I called to those in the hall. Then I opened a window. It was securely fastened, with a patent contraption which took me a few seconds to manipulate, but I got it raised and also another, and slowly the air began to purify.

I unwillingly looked at the bed. There lay

Marybelle, beautiful as a vision, one lovely arm flung above her head, and a soft smile on her face. Her eyes were closed, and I knew, in that first glance, that they would never open again in this world.

I want to say, right here, for the sake of my own self-respect, that my only emotions at that moment were the deepest sorrow and grief for the young life so suddenly and sadly ended.

But as people began to edge timidly over the threshold, I awoke to the exigencies of the situation.

"Come in, Wesley," I said, quietly, "and Lord Herringdean. Nobody else, for a moment."

The two men entered, and saw, as I had seen, the awful truth. The Earl went closer, and gently laid his hand on the laces of her night-dress. Then he touched her cheek.

"She is dead," he said, and though he showed no emotion, I knew that that was his English way, and not because he felt none.

"No!" cried Wesley, and he, too, reverently touched the pale face. "It may not be too late, Prall! Send for a doctor."

"Yes, send," I said, and Wesley hurried away to telephone.

Miss Field entered softly, without waiting for permission. And, indeed, who was I, that I should give or withhold it?

"What does it mean?" she said, in an awe-struck voice.

"An accident," I returned. "An awful accident. The gas burner was turned on full, and the fumes asphyxiated her."

"Are you sure she—she is——"

"Yes, Miss Field, there is no hope. But we have sent for the doctor."

"But can't we do something ourselves? Artificial respiration——"

"Not a chance. The flesh is cold, even stiffened. I know something of these matters, and I should judge she has been dead an hour or more."

"This gas is terrible," and Janet put her hand to her brow. "Can you not get it out?"

"It will soon go, now. But I will open another window."

The room had four large windows, two north and two east. These were each securely fastened with the patent catches, until I opened them. I took careful note of this, calling Miss Field's attention to it for future corroboration.

"Is it not strange," I said, "that Mrs. Moss should sleep with no ventilation?"

"She is subject to asthma," returned the girl, "and on very cold nights she always closes all her room windows. She ventilates through the bathroom."

For the first time, I noticed a door leading to a bathroom. It was ajar, and I stepped through. The bathroom window—there was but one—was open for the space of about six inches, and fastened in that position by a side catch. I could readily see, that though this might be deemed sufficient by some people for ventilation, it was really a very small aperture, and, as it had proved, was utterly inadequate to allow the gas to escape. I went back to the bedroom. Bellamy and Cissy were standing together, looking down at poor Marybelle.

I made a gesture to Wesley, which he understood.

"Prall," he said, so that all could hear, "I wish you'd take command here. It's a serious matter, and we must move carefully. I've called the doctor; he'll be here shortly. Meantime, we will all do as you say."

"Very well," I returned. "I've no real authority, but you, Wesley, are the nearest of kin here, or rather, your wife is, so I'll do as you ask. And I will request that the room be cleared, and no one comes in again, until after the doctor's arrival."

Lord Herringdean went away at once, without a word. Cissy went reluctantly, fairly dragged off by Bellamy. Miss Field had already gone, called away by a servant,

and Helen hadn't been in the room at all. I could hear her sobbing in her own room, next door. Wesley stayed, and he and I went right to the crucial question.

"Accident or suicide?" I said briefly.

"Oh, never suicide! Marybelle kill herself? Never!"

"But how could it be accidental?" I asked. "Look, Frank, the gas burner is too high for her to have reached. See, it is fully eight feet from the floor. I can't reach it by nearly a foot."

"By George, that's so. How did they ever light the thing?"

"It undoubtedly hasn't been used for years, not since they put in the electrics. When they used to burn gas they would use those long lighters, with wax tapers on them, and a slotted end to turn on the gas."

"Then how did it get turned on here? Where's the lighter?"

Wesley and I looked about, but saw no implement of the sort.

"Of course there isn't one about now," I said musingly. "If Marybelle turned on the gas purposely——"

"She never did!"

"*If* she did, she climbed on a chair or something. If it was turned on accidentally, it was hit by something. But what? What

could possibly hit that high fixture, and Marybelle not notice it?"

"She would notice the escaping gas at once."

"Of course she would. That's why I say it wasn't an accident."

"But, man alive, think a minute! Why would she kill herself just now? Now, when she is so happy and on the brink of a marriage that would bring her a title and a fortune!"

"I don't look for motives at the moment, I'm looking for facts. There's a mighty big mystery here, my boy, and we're just at the beginning of it."

I wanted to examine that gas burner, and I looked about for a chair to stand on. But the only ones I saw were fussy little willow rockers, low and unsteady; a dressing-table chair, firmer, but equally low; and a pair of low ottomans. None of these would allow me to reach the key of the burner, even if they would have borne my weight, which I doubted.

"Here's one," said Wesley, beginning to take some clothing off of a higher chair.

"Stop!" I cried. "Don't disturb evidence. Note those things, Frank. See, they are Marybelle's clothes laid out for morning. I happen to know she was going to ride with Herringdean, early, and this is her riding

habit. See the fresh white waistcoat, carefully placed, and the coat, hung over the chair back."

"Yes, that's so."

"Well, listen, then. Supposing suicide, for a moment. There's no chair that would bring Marybelle high enough to touch that key but this one. If she used it, then she laid all these clothes on it so carefully, *after she had turned on the gas!* Is that likely?"

"Lord, no! But, on the other hand, how could she accidentally hit the thing without knowing it? What did she hit it with?"

"I can't imagine. Would she have one of those hats with tall plumes——"

"Nonsense! A feather couldn't turn on a gas jet!"

"Her riding hat, then? Is that tall?"

"It's what they call a high hat, yes. But you know the height of a topper! Not more than six inches or so. That wouldn't be anywhere near that high burner. And accident is impossible, for she would have smelled the gas at once, or very soon. Long before she could go to bed and get to sleep."

Then Doctor Hewitt came. He was a fussy old man, and taciturn. Miss Field brought him to the room, and then asked me to go down and have some breakfast.

But my mind was made up. "Look here,

Miss Janet," I said, "I am a detective. Mrs. Moss's death is, to my mind, a mystery. I am not going to leave this room, except when it is empty and locked, until I have solved the mystery, to my own satisfaction, at least. In a way, now, you are mistress here. Have you any objections to my remaining in the room?"

"Why, I'm not mistress here," said the girl, looking startled, as at a new idea.

"No, but you're a member of the household, and so, in authority over the servants and appointments. At least, I hope you will feel that you are, for otherwise, who will look after things?"

Miss Field looked thoughtful. "Of course, I'm willing to do anything I can, to be helpful, but perhaps Mrs. Wesley will feel that I am presumptuous."

"She is a relative, to be sure, but she is so broken up and nervous, that I'm sure she can't attend to any—any of the things that—that must be attended to, and I'm sure she'd be glad to have you——"

"Yes, Mr. Prall, I understand. Well, so far as I am wanted to do anything, anything at all, I shall be glad to be of service."

Janet Field was a fine girl, and I knew she understood, without further words, that I meant funeral arrangements, and perhaps even more harrowing scenes. The mystery of

Marybelle Moss's death must be cleared up, and meantime someone must keep the household machinery running, and I knew poor little distracted Helen Wesley couldn't do it.

Miss Field stood looking at me. She was slender and very straight and carried herself like a young Diana. I had never noticed before that she was beautiful—no, not that, but very fine-looking. Her heavy hair was jet black and her eyes, large, soft and black, with heavy brows and lashes. I remembered my theory about hair, and concluded she had great intuition. Her skin was a clear olive, and she had a way of drawing her eyes together, that intensified her gaze until she seemed to read your very soul. She looked at me this way now.

"Mr. Prall," she said, "what killed Marybelle?"

"Asphyxiation."

"Oh, I know that. I mean, how did it happen?"

"That is the mystery, Miss Field. Was the gas chandelier ever used in here?"

"Oh, never. Nor anywhere in the house. The electric——"

We had been talking in low tones, while the Doctor made his examinations. We were standing near the door of the room, out of the way, and now Doctor Hewitt spoke to me.

"You're a detective, I'm told, sir."

"Yes," I replied, "that is my profession, Doctor."

"Then I hope you'll make out this puzzle. It's the Devil's work somehow, but I can't see how. I've known Marybelle all her life, and while full of the dickens in lots of ways, she never would take her own life. This is no suicide, no, sir! Again, it couldn't be. Why, she hasn't been dead more than two hours at most. And it would take maybe—perhaps—well, say about two hours for death to ensue from the time the gas was turned on. Lemmesee, that would make it—it's nearly nine now—that gas was turned on in the neighborhood of between four and five o'clock this morning."

"As late as that!" I cried, chagrined at my thoughtlessness that could have been imagining it turned on before the victim had gone to bed.

"Yes, or not much earlier. It's hard to say exactly. There's the size of the jet to be considered. Let's take a look at it."

I fetched a chair from the hall, and standing on it, felt the top of the gas burner.

"Why!" I exclaimed, "there's no lava tip on it!"

"No tip! Then no wonder the gas poured out in such volumes. Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. It's not surprising, that. The chandelier hasn't been used for years, and in cleaning, the tip has been brushed off and never replaced."

"How about the other burners?"

There were eight in all, and every one had a tip except the one that I had turned off.

"Perhaps you knocked the tip off when you turned off the gas," suggested Doctor Hewitt, who was keen-witted, for all his fussiness.

"No," said I, thinking hard, "I'm sure I didn't. The glass globe would prevent that. But we can look around on the floor."

"How did you reach it to turn it off, anyway? It's very high."

"I jumped for it," I replied. "When I entered, and the gas was so terrible, I sprang up at the key and turned it off with a twist. I remember it shook the chandelier pretty hard. But it didn't jar the tip out. These others are in too tightly to make that idea plausible."

"Then that tip was taken out purposely, and it must be suicide, after all."

"Or——" I prompted.

"Don't say it. Let us exhaust all other possibilities first."

Then Cissy came and begged me so prettily to come and get some breakfast, that I yielded to her persuasion. Doctor Hewitt promised

to remain in the room until I returned, and to allow no one to touch or disarrange a thing. I knew the coroner would have to come, and probably soon, so I wanted to get a bite to eat and be ready to return before he arrived.

Poor little Cissy had cried until she was quite worn out, and she was quivering with nervous excitement and exhaustion. We went together to the dining room, and she poured my coffee and ordered hot muffins for me, as if glad of any trivial occupation. Herringdean stood looking out of a window. Bellamy was at the table, his merry quips for once silenced.

"Anything new?" he asked me, abruptly.

"No, nothing definite. Doctor Hewitt says death occurred between six and seven."

"And there was I, right across the hall!" exclaimed Cissy. "I have the other front room, and I lay there sleeping, while Marybelle was dying." She broke down utterly and ran from the room.

"Let's get at some facts," said Rock Bellamy. "Who first gave the alarm?"

"I don't know," I said; "Wesley came up and called me, and when I got down, there were several people in the hall by the door."

"Call that maid, and ask her something about it."

I rang a bell and the waitress came. I

asked her to send in the maid, Vida, and she said she would. Lord Herringdean turned round at this, and seemed ready to take part in the conversation.

Vida came, pale and red-eyed. She was nervous, but readily answered our questions.

"Tell us about it, Vida," I said after a few queries. "Tell us all that happened from the time you came down from your own room."

"From the time I came down?" she said, and the look on her face was curious to see. "Then, it is this way. I am the chambermaid, but also, I am much the personal maid of Madame. She does not like a lady's maid, and yet, there are many things I can do for her. She tells me last night, waken her at eight, oh, but surely at eight, as she goes for the early ride with my lord, the Earl. So I obey, and at eight, precise, I go and tap at Madame's door. She does not answer, and though I dislike to disturb her slumber, yet I must obey, and I tap again, yet many times. But always is there no response, and I feel a queerness, almost a fear. I go at last and tell Mrs. Blum, the cook. She laughs at my fear and says I must rap more loudly. I go back and rap quite, quite loud, and I call, softly, and then more loud, but never is there any answer. The rest you know."

The very simplicity of Vida's story made it

dramatic. The girl was agitated, but controlled herself admirably, and at last, dismissed, she left the room with a bowed head and rapidly filling eyes.

We left the dining room, and I was about to return to the room of the tragedy, when the Earl detained me.

"What do you think is the true cause of her death, Mr. Prall?" he asked, and though he was absolutely composed of countenance, his voice shook.

I looked at him straightforwardly. Somehow, I liked him less at that moment than I had before. "I cannot say, Lord Herringdean," I answered, "but there is a deep mystery behind it, that will not be easily solved. You cannot think she would bring about her own death, can you?"

"I cannot think so. She was happy, I am sure, in anticipation of her marriage to me; and unless she had some secret cause for desiring death, I cannot imagine she would seek it voluntarily."

"What is this about a pearl necklace?" I asked. "Forgive me if I am intrusive, but the occasion calls for frankness."

"Of course. It is no secret now. I gave her the necklace last evening after dinner. We were alone in the little library, and as I clasped it round her throat she took it off

again and said she would not let her friends see it until to-day. It was a pretty bit of sentiment on her part, I think. She said she wanted it all to herself for one night."

"The necklace has not been found, that I know of."

"Has it been looked for?"

"Probably not, as no one knew she had it."

"Then it will be found, wherever she put it for safe keeping."

I liked his lordship for not showing more concern in this matter, but I still felt that indefinable distaste for his manner otherwise. He was cold, and ill at ease. Had he been frankly grieving, I would have forgiven him much, but his detached air offended me.

Cissy Carreau came flying downstairs, and joined us as we stood in the hall.

"I know all about it now!" she cried, her eyes wide and her white face strained and eerie looking. "It was the *Poltergeist!*"

"Cissy! Be quiet!" said Rock, seizing the girl by the arm. "Don't talk that nonsense now!"

"'Tisn't nonsense! Let go my arm, Rock. Mr. Prall, you see, you *must* see, it's that—the Evil Spirit! Oh! I can't tell you, if you don't understand! I mean the bad, tricky spirits that come to some people and torment them. And don't you see, it *couldn't* have been any-

thing else. Marybelle wouldn't take her own life, just now, when she was so happy! Oh, you don't know how happy she was! I know, she had confided in me a great deal. She was wildly, gloriously happy! She never left such happiness purposely! Nor could it possibly have been an accident. I've been studying it out. The Doctor says she—it happened early this morning, the turning on the gas jet, I mean—about four o'clock maybe. How could an accident happen then? Marybelle was asleep. She was always a sound sleeper, except when her asthma bothered her. And the room was locked, bolted, and the windows fastened. Nobody could get in. And the *Poltergeist,* the wicked evil ghost came and turned on the jet and left it turned on!"

Cissy's voice nearly failed her, she shook like a leaf, and her eyes burned in her white, quivering face, but she went on: "And don't you know what the *Poltergeist* was? What form it took? It was the hand—the long, yellow hand, that killed her mother? Oh, no, she didn't tell you last night, when she told that story, that her mother died of the effects of the yellow hand. No, she didn't want to tell the tragedy entirely. But that is true, her mother did die soon after that experience. Marybelle told me the story long ago, but she never told it in public before—and the *Pol-*

tergeist thought she was making fun—and she was—and in revenge the Yellow Hand, the *Poltergeist* Yellow Hand, came and turned on Marybelle's gas jet! Oh, *don't* you see it! Don't you *see* it! What other hand could have done it? Tell me that!"

It was Janet Field who tried to quiet the overexcited girl.

"Come with me, Cissy, dear," she said, soothingly, "come with me to your room and let's talk this over quietly."

"No, I won't. *You* know, Janet, I'm speaking the truth. You know how locked up the room was, you know nobody could possibly get in to turn on that gas, and you know Marybelle didn't do it, and couldn't if she had wanted to. So you know—you *know* it must have been the Yellow Hand! Don't you know it, Janet? Don't you *know* it was in revenge for Marybelle's telling about the hand last night? Answer me, Janet! Don't you know it was the hand of revenge?"

Her eyes glared now, and Janet seeing the danger of contradiction, said impetuously, "Yes, Cissy, yes, it must have been that!"

None of us blamed Janet for agreeing with the frenzied girl, whether she spoke truth or not, and to my surprise, Lord Herringdean said slowly, "There *is* no other solution. Call it absurd, if you will, there is no other way to

account for the death of my fiancée. When there is no possibility of a human hand in the matter, we must admit it to be the work of the fiends."

"You know," cried Cissy, suddenly calmer. "You understand, because you loved Marybelle. Oh, that awful hand, creeping up, up, up, and turning, turning, turning——"

And then Janet succeeded in getting the girl to go away with her, and I knew Cissy would be tenderly cared for.

As for me, I had my heart's desire at last. I grieved deeply for beautiful Marybelle, I sympathized with the Earl, I was sorry for Janet Field and Helen Wesley. But quite aside and apart from all this, almost, it seemed, with another mentality, I rejoiced at my opportunity, come at last! I had the unraveling to do, of the mystery I had longed for; a mysterious death in an inaccessible room. Let the solution be *Poltergeist,* if it chose, or accident, or suicide, or murder in the first degree, let the solution be as difficult, as impossible as it might, I would find it!

I had not the slightest fear of failure, the conditions should baffle me not a whit; I would find the cause of Marybelle Moss's death, whether it was by some simple, natural means or was the work of the Hand of Revenge.

CHAPTER III

THE MOONSTONE RING

NOW, given a mysterious death, the inquest must follow, as the night the day. And this custom, established by tradition and long usage, will, I suppose, always obtain. But to me, an inquest is a thing inapt, inept, inopportune. From its bushel of chaff you may get a grain of wheat in evidence, and then, again, you may not. But the inquest is a necessary evil and the coroner is an evil necessity, so we must put up with both.

To me, the hours of that day simply flew. I, and I may as well admit my baseness from the first, had a haunting fear that a plain and ordinary solution of the mystery—say, burglar or proven accident—would reveal itself, and I would be nicked out of the chance that had come to me to give my ingenuity full play. And this is not as cold-blooded as it might seem at first blush. Marybelle was dead, nothing could restore her life, and if she had been murdered, it would at least give us the gruesome satisfaction of punishing the criminal.

That happy, hopeful young life must be avenged; and if there were a murderer to be found, I knew I should find him. He could not escape my pursuit, for I was prepared to put to use the very limit of my cleverness and skill. That bride-to-be lay down, I was certain, with calm assuredness of waking next morning to take up her life of new happiness, with anticipation of more and better joys as time went by.

Instead, the house now was invaded by strange people. Coroner, doctors, police, detectives, reporters, and shoals of helpful or curious neighbors filled Woodshurst with an atmosphere in which mystery and crime jostled against sorrow and mourning.

The coroner's name was Kemble and the inspector's was Blair. I suppose the jury, hastily gotten together, had names, but they interested me no more than a page of the telephone book.

In fact, I didn't attend the first part of the inquest. The preliminary proceedings were of no use to my quest, and, too, I had made friends with a bright young reporter and he promised to record for me anything I might otherwise miss.

I knew the routine. Coroner Kemble would ask questions with the air of a recently-degreed owl, and then his precious jury would

noddingly arrive at false conclusions and return an open verdict.

When called upon, I was ready and willing to tell all I knew of the whole matter, but in the meantime, I had only the laudable purpose of increasing that knowledge.

But I am getting a little, oh, just a very little, ahead of my story. It was during the first examination of the bedroom by the police, that I, too, made my first thorough examination. They didn't bother me. The coroner, the inspector, and a little Central Office detective, named Weldon, fussed and fiddled around, looking up the chimney most of the time, in their eagerness to find entrance to that locked and bolted room.

I remarked that I was going to examine the chandelier, and as no one objected, I sent for a short step-ladder. A three-step affair was brought me, which was just what I wanted, as it gave me ample access to the high burners, without getting in their way.

Instead of removing the glass shade from the burner that had been turned on, I climbed up and looked over. I had already felt it, over the top of the shade, and found it tipless. But now, able to see the burner from above, I nearly fell off the step-ladder at what I saw. Oh, yes, I know Sherlock Holmes wouldn't have moved a facial muscle, if he had seen a

jack-in-the-box jump out at him from the gas globe; but I am like that man only in capability, not at all in manner.

Still, I kept my rather insecure footing, and picked out the object. It was a ring, a lady's gold ring, set with a moonstone. I looked at it thoroughly, though not with a lens (I told you my mannerisms were different, and besides, I hadn't a lens with me.) Then I put it back where I had found it, came down and told Blair.

Greatly excited, he flew up the steps, two at a time, as far as he could, there were only three, and taking off the gas globe gave it to me to hold, while he showed off the ring to all present.

I called his attention to the fact that the globe was very dusty inside, and the ring was not dusty, nor was the burner. He looked wise at this, but as he didn't know what he was looking wise about, I volunteered the information that, as the ring had not been dusty when I spied it, so far as one can judge of such a small article, it seemed to me it had been placed in that strange position quite lately. The gas never being used, the high globes were not frequently washed.

"Just what I think," courteously agreed Blair, and pocketing the ring for evidence, he replaced the glass shade and came down the steps.

The ring business nonplussed me. Had Marybelle put it there for safekeeping? I knew her fear of burglars, and it was a good hiding place, so that doubtless explained it. But if she chose such a clever hiding place for a ring of but moderate value at most, where had she concealed her pearl necklace?

I never should have thought of looking for a ring on the gas burner, if I hadn't been looking there for other reasons. Surely the mystery was deepening every moment.

Well, we found nothing else as queer as that, but we found some pretty conclusive evidence, at least it seemed to me, that Marybelle didn't kill herself.

And this was letters, quite a pile of them, on her writing desk; all addressed and stamped, doubtless to go by the morning's mail. Mr. Kemble at once opened them, though I was not sure that he was altogether within his rights. We read them, and after the reading I never again entertained the idea of suicide. Every one was full of plans, appointments and engagements for the next day or two. One to a dressmaker made an arrangement for fitting a gown. One, to a dentist, asked for an appointment at his office. Two or three accepted invitations, or gave them.

One important one was to her lawyer, Mr. Curtis, and asked him to come to see her as

soon as possible, as she wanted to change her will. She stated that her reason for this was her engagement, only just now announced, and she hoped Mr. Curtis would find it convenient to come at once, on receipt of her letter.

Another, and very personal one, was to an intimate woman friend, and told of the engagement, the announcement party and the early probable date of the wedding. It expressed such an exuberance of happiness, such an exultant joy of living, that it was impossible to believe it was not sincere. It told, also, of the present of the pearl necklace and said that Marybelle planned to surprise her guests with it on the morrow. And it wound up by saying, "I hope I can make Geoffrey happy, and I feel sure I shall. He is a different type from Bradley, and his tastes are more congenial to my own."

Bradley Moss was her first husband, and though I had never known him, I had heard rumors from the Wesleys of the uneven tenor of Marybelle's married life.

Now, who could believe in the face of those letters, written late the night before, after her announcement of her betrothal, that the writer would voluntarily cut short the happy life she anticipated?

But Weldon demurred a little, saying that

if the lady had wanted to kill herself, she would write just such letters to divert suspicion. But I couldn't admit such an overdoing of that idea. If it were a true theory, Marybelle might have written one letter or two, making appointments, but not so many or so real.

I looked again at the chairs in the room. Without doubt, as she sat at her desk to write, she had used that straight chair, slightly higher than the others. But even with that, I saw she couldn't have reached the gas key. Nor, would she have done so if she could, and then afterward have used that chair to lay out her morning's costume! It was too absurd. Machiavelli himself wouldn't have observed such minutiae of detail.

Lawyer Curtis arrived about then, and we showed him the letter to himself. He looked very grave, and said it was most unfortunate that she hadn't sent him that message sooner.

"Why, who is her heir?" asked Blair quickly.

"Several minor legacies, and Mrs. Wesley, residuary legatee," answered Curtis briefly, as he stood frowning in thought.

My heart gave a jump. If this were not suicide, and I positively couldn't see the way clear to an accident, then it must be murder. And if murder, then the first question would

be, motive. And the heirs-at-law would be looked at first. But the Wesleys! Impossible!

However, for that matter, everything about the case was impossible. There wasn't a possibility of solution that I could lay my hand on anywhere, and I began to welcome the thought of the queries at the inquest, which would, at least, tabulate the impossibilities.

We went on with the scrutiny of the room. When I say that it was inaccessible, I have said all.

There were two doors of exit. One, to the hall, by which we had burst in, the other opened into the Wesleys' room, next back of Marybelle's. This door was as thoroughly locked and bolted as the hall door, and with just the same kind of fastenings. Nobody could have gone out of it, and bolted it behind him. Two more doors led to the bathroom and to a large clothes closet. We took everything out of the closet, to search for secret panels or trap doors, but found nothing of the sort. The bathroom was lighted by one window, and this, as I have said, was open six inches and firmly fastened. It was as impossible to open it from the outside as if it had been entirely closed. Moreover, there was no ledge or balcony of any sort; only a sheer drop of about twenty feet to the ground. The

other windows in the bedroom were locked when I entered the room, and I showed the policeman how thoroughly safe the fastenings were.

I am an expert in these matters, and Blair was only less so, and we saw at once that no intruder came through doors or windows, however he may have made entrance.

I sat down in a corner and began to muse. Much as I had wanted a mystery in an inaccessible room, I felt I should be glad now to get an inkling of a way to look for a solution. I had in no degree lost faith in my powers and I was certain of ultimate success, but I longed for a clue or two. To be sure, there was the ring on the gas fixture, and my esteemed fiction hero has often remarked that a bizarre clue helps along amazingly. I wanted to wonder what he would have deduced from that ring, but I wouldn't pay him so much of a compliment. I merely wondered what to deduce from it, myself.

In all our search we saw nothing of the pearls, and I felt sure Marybelle had hidden them from possible burglars. (Yes, burglars were the one possibility in this impossible situation.)

Then Weldon found the case that had contained the necklace. Of light blue velvet lined with white satin, the dainty affair

seemed to mock at our inquiring glances. It was in a dresser drawer, and Weldon was for the burglar theory, hot and strong. But a pearl necklace always connotes burglary in some minds, and I paid no attention to his chatter.

Of course, poor Marybelle herself, had been taken away, and we ruthlessly searched the bed linen and mattresses for the pearls. Under the pillows we found a watch, and a small locket containing Herringdean's picture, but no other jewels. There was a cobweb of a handkerchief that gave out a faint perfume, but my reason failed to find any clue in these things.

Again I sat down and mused. I was glad I was not a heavy man, for those foolish little willow rockers were better built to hang harps (small ones) on than to support a solid detective. But I had selected one of them, in a certain corner of the room, which commanded a view of the chandelier and of Marybelle's bed, and I proposed to sit in that chair and study that room off and on, until I conquered that mystery or failed ignominiously. And the latter I knew I should not do.

The coroner went downstairs to maneuver his inquest. Soon the others trailed after him, and left the room to darkness and to me. "Darkness" being a figurative term, for the

room was bright with December sunlight. But the darkness of the mystery, the black nothingness of that room, with unlighted gas pouring into it for hours, turned on by an unseen, unknown, unimaginative hand—unless —— I found myself thinking of Cissy's *Poltergeist,* the Yellow Hand!

CHAPTER IV

THE CORONER

I PRESENTLY left the room and, with a few words to the guard stationed at the door, went in search of some of the people I knew.

The Wesleys' door was ajar, and I tapped. Frank answered, and asked me in. Poor little Helen was in a sad state. Nervous and overwrought, she was crying like a small fountain, and Cissy was trying to calm her. But Cissy was little better as to nerves, and the two were enough to make a man a misogynist for life.

But I wanted to ask some questions and I tried my powers of tranquillization. Frank helped me, and soon a little man-talk interested the girls and they began to chatter. Skilfully guiding the trend of the conversation, I led it to Marybelle's earlier life, in fact to her years with her husband.

"He was nice enough, Bradley was," said Helen, "but Marybelle led him a dance! She —oh, well, you know what she was—a gadabout, always. Bradley hated to go anywhere, and night after night she would make

him go to dinners and dances that he loathed. And—well at last he died."

"Cause and effect?" I asked.

"In a way," Helen said. "You see the man wasn't strong. The doctor said he must go to California or Arizona, or some such place. Marybelle wouldn't go with him, and wouldn't let him go without her, so they stayed here. Brad got weaker and weaker, but Marybelle wouldn't let up on the gayeties. Why, don't you remember, Frank, the last party here before he died?"

"Yes," said Wesley. "Ghastly, it was! Bradley was awfully ill, but Marybelle made him do stunts for us. Oh, never mind all that now. You know, Prall, what a siren she was. She could make a man see white as black, if she wanted to."

"I didn't know all that," said Cissy, who with wide eyes had been drinking in the tale. "I loved Marybelle."

"She was lovable," said Helen, "but she was not an admirable character. She——"

"There, there, dear," said Wesley, "don't talk that way about her now. Poor Marybelle isn't here to defend herself."

"Who was Bradley Moss?" I asked to change the subject.

"He was from New York, I think. You see, Marybelle and her mother lived alone in

this big house, and her mother died. So Marybelle took a companion, Janet Field, you know. Sort of companion and secretary both. She was from New York. I'm not sure but she introduced Moss to Marybelle—think she did. Well, in three months or so, Marybelle had Brad eating out of her hand, and soon they were married. Janet left then—guess Marybelle didn't want her. But when Bradley died, Marybelle seemed glad to get Janet back, and she's been here ever since."

"And where did the Earl drop from?"

"Oh, he met Marybelle last summer, somewhere, and she annexed him all up, as fast as she could."

"And you're nearest of kin?" I asked of Helen.

"Yes, the house is mine now. It seems so strange. Poor Marybelle——"

"You know she wrote to Curtis she wanted to change her will."

I don't know why I sprung that on Helen, but for the life of me I couldn't help it. Anyway, she went white, and asked how I knew. I told her about the letter to Curtis, and then Helen went off in her hysterics again, and I left the room.

I went downstairs and found the inquest had reached the stage of questioning servants. This always bores me, for I never knew it to

produce a clue yet, and the evidence they would give was all known to me, or would be reported.

I glanced over my reporter boy's notes. The servants had already told about the first intimations of the tragedy, and of entering the room. The Earl had given his evidence, also Bellamy. Vida was now recalled, because the lights were in question.

"But, no," she was saying with her everlasting adverbiage—she ascribed as much virtue to "but" as Touchstone did to "if." "But, no, Madame used little light in her bedroom. Never did she desire my help at retiring time. She flicked on the dressing-table lights, or, if writing letters, the desk lamp. Also, had she the bedside light. But the great chandelier she used almost never."

"You mean the electric fixtures of the great chandelier?"

"But, certainly. The gas was never lighted, it could not be, because of its great height. Madame was not tall, nor am I, myself. Moreover, the lights hurt her eyes a little. Madame was near-sighted, and preferred the closer lights."

More was said here, but all went to indicate that Marybelle had not touched the gas burner either by design or by accident.

The butler was asked about the gas in the

house. He knew little, it seemed, but Mrs. Blum, the cook, declared that no gas whatever was used except in the gas range for cooking, and in a water-heater for dish washing. In all her experience, and she had been with Mrs. Moss over three years, never had a burner been lighted for illumination in the house to her knowledge.

"An' why wud it?" she asked, "with them electrics all over the place? And there ain't no leak in the pipes, that there ain't. I shud 'a' smelt it, so. The poor lydy was murdered, that' wot, sir, and uv ye don't find out who put up the job, yer a disgrace to yer callin', and that's fer certain!"

It was with some difficulty that Mrs. Blum was induced to stop her witnessing, but the cessation was achieved, and a few more queries put to Vida. These were concerning the pearl necklace, and its probable hiding place. If that could be located——

"But yes!" Vido butted in. "When Madame had a new jewel, ah, then was there great to-do to hide it! But after a few weeks the carelessness returned and the gems were laid on the dresser or anywhere. Now, of these pearls I have no knowledge. But if there was a new gift and of a value, rest assured Madamehidit most cleverly, and it will be indeed difficult to find! I have known her to bore a

long hole in a chairleg and in it put her diamond lorgnette chain. But that was when the chain was new."

"That explains the auger," said Weldon.

"What auger?" asked the coroner.

"There was a long, slender auger in the lower dresser drawer, and I wondered at its being in a lady's possession."

"But yes," insisted Vida, "twice Madame did bore such holes. In the chair and in the window sill."

"The window sill!"

"Yes, right down straight. Then when the window is closed and fastened, the hole is hidden and the jewels are safe. Ah, but Madame was the clever one. Yet, withal, if she had new jewels, new hiding places must be invented, and even so, all windows must be exceedingly locked and barred against burglars, and all doors double-bolted. She had so much fear."

"Perhaps, then the pearls are even now in these bored holes. Do you know where the holes are?"

"Yes, but I think Madame conceived some new hiding place for her new gift. One that I may not find."

"Ah, she distrusted you, then?"

It was a mean and unfounded implication, and I rather expected to see Vida resent it.

But she did not, she merely replied, "Not that so much as that she feared burglars."

And then Vida was sent away with Weldon and the inspector to look for the pearls in Marybelle's room.

But they did not find them.

"Oh, good Lord!" I said to myself. "If they'll get on with the game, I'll find their precious necklace myself when I've a little spare time. Either it's stolen or hidden, and in either case I'll find it."

You see, even Sherlock Holmes was not more confident of his powers than I. But I had never fallen down.

And then I thought, whose was the necklace? Whether available or not, who was its owner? And I realized it must be Helen Wesley, for she was residuary legatee, and the new will had not been made.

My thoughts went back to my recent confab with the Wesleys. And I had to admit, my friends though they were, I did not like their attitude on the subject of Marybelle. To my mind they had talked about her in a way that ought not to be used in connection with the dead. But I interrupted my own thoughts to listen to Lawyer Curtis. He was telling of the property, saying the house was now Mrs. Wesley's, and much money would also be hers.

The will gave ten thousand dollars to Janet

Field. Two thousand to Vida; a thousand each to Mrs. Blum and the butler, Spears. Some other servants had smaller legacies, some charities were remembered, and the rest was Helen's. The pearls were not mentioned just here, nor was the letter that Marybelle had written to Curtis the night before.

I didn't altogether approve of the way the inquest was conducted, but then, I had never attended an inquest that did rouse my admiration and I never hope to. So I sat still and listened and thought my own thoughts, by turns, expecting every minute to be called on for my own testimony.

Janet Field came next. She told nothing I didn't already know. Said she had been with Mrs. Moss about six months at one time, and later, a year and a half. She corroborated Vida's stories of Marybelle's fear of burglars and of her tendency to asthma, these two things finally reconciling the jury to the lady's unhygienic methods of ventilation. Janet spoke in praise of Marybelle, but under fire, admitted she was vain and fond of flattery. But she quickly added that she had been a generous and kind friend (of course, Miss Field did not consider herself in any way a servant) and said frankly, when asked, that she knew she was mentioned in the will for ten thousand dollars.

"I see your drift," thought I, as I watched the coroner. "Men of your legal caliber always fix the guilt on the butler or private secretary. Failing these, they suspect the maid-servant who found the body of her master in the library at seven-thirty A.M." These details didn't exactly fit this case, but the working principle of that sort of coroner is always the same.

Well, Janet said little more, and Frank Wesley, next, was equally repetitory of what we all knew.

Then Cissy came. She was all on edge, with excitement and importance. She was the one to whom Marybelle had confided the secret of the new necklace, though, boiled down, it was merely a whispered word or two as the women said good-night on the stair-landing the night before.

"And," Cissy related, "Marybelle said, 'Come in my room with me, and see them'; then she said, 'No, not to-night, either. I don't want to show them till to-morrow. But you'll be surprised!' So that's why I thought she was keeping her door locked, to put up a trick on us, of some sort. But now, I know the pearls were taken away in the night, and I know—" Cissy's voice grew solemn—"I know who did it—and who killed her."

"You do!" and the coroner turned on her

almost fiercely. "You do, young woman! Who then?"

"*Poltergeist!*" Cissy's voice was a hissing whisper and her eyes were wild and weird in their expression. "Hush!" She held up her hand as the coroner began to speak. "Of course you don't know what that means! I didn't suppose you would. But it is an evil spirit who attacks people and harms them and kills them. The *Poltergeist* has power of materialization or disappearance, at will. And they can steal and maim and kill. Hush, I tell you, till I have finished! This *Poltergeist* attacked and killed Mrs. Moss's mother, some years ago. But I never dreamed it would attack Marybelle! You see, the *Poltergeist* assumes any shape it pleases, and this one was a hand, a long, strong, yellow hand, it clutched Mrs. Stafford, the mother, by the throat; but in Marybelle's case, it came by night, silently in the dark hour, and slowly turned on the gas. Then, laughing, in wicked, fiendish glee, it disappeared, leaving its victim alone to die—to die——"

Cissy finished and sank down in a little crumpled heap, almost unconscious.

"Take me away," she moaned, "take me away."

And it was Frank Wesley who led her away, beckoning Vida as they went.

Coroner Kemble looked helpless, as some men do when women faint or fly into hysterics. Although they do say women don't faint nowadays. But there are other tricks of the sex quite as effective, and anyway, feminine evidence is so circumstantial and circumferential and circumlocutory, that I don't blame a coroner much for ignoring it. However, I do blame him for enough other things to make up for that.

So the blameworthy Mr. Kemble dragged his inquest's slow length along, after the fashion of the poet's wounded snake, and what with the adjournments and recallings and arguments, I thought it never would have done. At last the name of Mr. Owen Prall was called. A line of an old nursery jingle flashed into my mind:

The cat, when called, will walk away.

And I was possessed of a strong desire to follow in the cat's footsteps. But of course, I didn't, and I gave my evidence in my best Friday afternoon declamatory style.

Now, don't you think, for a minute, that I wasn't seriously interested in this case. Interested, Lord! I was crazy to get at real work on it. But these men in charge saw only the tragedy, the pathetic death of a beautiful woman, and though eager to fasten blame

somewhere, they didn't know who was to blame or what for, and they had no mental means of finding out.

When I detect, I can't see the human side at all, I see only the material facts before me, and their significance. When a minister marries a couple, he may be laying the foundations of a heart-breaking tragedy, but it is none of his business. He doesn't see the human side of it. If he did, he'd refuse to touch off the match. So with me, I longed to get all this over, and devote my mind to the problem in earnest.

And at last it was all over but the shouting, and the coroner did the shouting.

He said, by way of summing up, that the case was inexplicable. That death occurred in a securely fastened room with absolutely no means of ingress or egress, therefore it could not have been a murder. Consequently, it must have been accident or suicide. But it could not have been accident, for the gas was out of reach of the occupant of the room, and no way to get up to it could be discerned or imagined. Therefore it was not accident and must be suicide. But it was clearly proved by the evidence of the belongings of the deceased, the clothing, the letters, and lastly, by an entry in her diary (which had not yet been read) that suicide was utterly out of

the question. Therefore it must have been murder. But that could not be, for no murderer could leave the room with the doors locked and bolted behind him, and the windows fastened. Therefore—— But the coroner had completed his circle and had started round again. Helplessly he floundered in the bog of his own intelligence. Therefore, he concluded, the deceased could not have met her death by accident, she could not have committed suicide, and she could not have been murdered. He submitted that it was an inexplicable mystery.

It was. The jury returned an open verdict, kindly explaining, "and by this we mean that we find a sudden and violent death has occurred, and we do not find the cause proved."

Legal phrases often show a fine sense of terminology. That could not have been better worded. And now the farce was over and the sudden and violent death had occurred and I was at liberty to find the cause proved.

CHAPTER V

A BLIND ALLEY

BARROWSVILLE, naturally, was in a ferment over the matter. From the Oldest Resident to the Newest Rich, the subject was paramount, discussions were held, suggestions were made and enough solutions offered to keep an ordinary detective sleuthing for a year.

I listened to none of them. I simply took possession of Marybelle's room and set to work.

You see, the fact that I can solve a problem doesn't necessarily mean that I can solve it quickly or easily. It simply means that I finally arrive. I try, of course, to get there by the nearest route, but it may be that the longest way round is the surest way home.

The Wesleys fell easily into possession of their new estate. Too easily, some thought, for I was treated to many opinions and insinuations by the townspeople. Not to be obscure, I may as well say that not a few opined that the two Wesleys were in some mysterious way responsible for the death of Marybelle,

the motive being a speedy inheritance of her wealth.

But I didn't think this, though I was looking into the matter, and I willingly accepted the Wesleys' invitation to stay on after the funeral and see what I could discover. This invitation of theirs was in their favor, but if they were clever enough to bring about that mysterious murder, they were clever enough to pull the wool over my eyes.

I say murder, for I gave up all idea of suicide (for the dozenth time) after reading Marybelle's diary. The pathetic entry, written the night of her death, was enough proof for me. It said, in part:

> To-night, dear Journal, is the happiest of my life. I have announced my engagement to Geoffrey, and everybody seemed so pleased. Even Helen was very sweet about it, though I told her I should alter my will. Oh, I am so glad Geoff is an Earl! A title has always been my heart's dearest desire. I shall be Countess of Herringdean! How different from being merely the wife of Bradley Moss. And the two men are as different as day and night. Brad was nice, in a way, but so slow and dull. Of course, he was ill, poor fellow, but I wasn't, and I wanted life and happiness. Well, I shall have it now. And I have a marvelous string of pearls. I shall exhibit it tomorrow, and how the girls will envy me. Cissy and Janet will fairly turn green! Tomorrow I must send notices of the engagement to the New York papers. I hope they will send up reporters. Now, dear Journal, my only confidant, I must go to sleep, for tomorrow morning I ride with Geoffrey and I must look my best.

The tenor of this entry did not show a fine nature, I admit, but we never ascribed high-mindedness to Marybelle. She was one of

Fortune's spoiled children, and had a knack of getting what she wanted, by her own power of persuasion. But none the less, she had been most foully murdered, and the villain must be brought to justice. Also, I had my case. A murder—it *was* a murder—mysteriously committed in an inaccessible room—it *was* inaccessible—and no clue to work from!

I took possession of Marybelle's room. I mean I occupied it, night and day, for I felt that only thus could I succeed in my task. I wasn't in it every minute, of course, but many daylight hours I sat there, pondering. I had chosen a chair in the front window, and I stuck to it, as it was a seat practically commanding the whole room. Remember the house faced north. The room was the northeast one, and back of it, the southeast corner of the house, was the Wesleys' room. The north and east sides of Marybelle's room had two windows each, and the other side, the west side, was next the hall. The bath was between the room and the Wesleys' room, as was also the large clothes closet.

There also was a corresponding bath, next back of Marybelle's, which opened into the Wesleys' bedroom. Thus, the two bathrooms were side by side. But though I hung out my bathroom window for hours at a time, and out of the Wesleys' for, say, half-hours at a time,

I couldn't for the life of me see how Frank could have climbed out of one and in at the other, when there was no ledge of any sort. The windows were eight feet apart, and the one in Marybelle's bathroom fastened with a six-inch opening. Only a monkey could have done it. Stay, a monkey! The Murders in the Rue Morgue! But Wesley didn't possess a trained ape or chimpanzee, and anyway, there was nothing for him to climb up on. A monkey can scramble pretty nimbly, but he can't be trained to spring from the floor to a chandelier, especially when the room is pitch dark! And besides, I didn't suspect old Frank. I knew him pretty well, and though he and Helen did seem to enjoy their good fortune, and didn't seem to mourn Marybelle overmuch, yet I discarded the monkey idea as just about as impossible as any other theory.

The nutshell into which I put my final tabulation was simply this:

1. The gas was turned on.
2. Marybelle couldn't have turned it on.
3. Nobody else could have turned it on.

These seem to be contradictory facts. But there are no contradictory facts. Very well, then. Number one is a fact, and either two or three is not a fact. I am sure number two is a fact. Anyway, it is far more likely to be than number three, if only for the reason that

there was but one Marybelle and millions of bodies else.

So, as a working hypothesis, I took the fact, the *fact,* mind you, that somebody else did turn on that gas, and I settled down to find out that somebody's name.

My thinking chair, now a comfortable arm-chair instead of one of the wicker fol-de-rols, was in the northwest corner of the room, thus commanding the door from the hall, as well as all the other doors and windows of the room. I left the hall door ajar, always, and encouraged any one who cared to, to come in and discuss the matter with me at any time.

Cissy Carreau, with her hysterics and her *Poltergeist* had gone home, and I was glad of it. Bellamy had gone, too, but the Earl still lingered and Janet Field was to stay a short time longer. Most of the servants had given notice, some indeed had left, but there were enough to look after us comfortably and the house was run pretty much as when Marybelle was there.

"I'm going to hunt for the pearls," said Helen, coming in one morning.

"Very well," I returned, a little absently. I was used to her puttering about, poking into cracks and crevices, climbing to the tops of wardrobes or bureaus, and rummaging dresser drawers that had been gone through scores of

times. But, she argued, the things were all hers, and she had a right to rummage all she wished. The pearls were hers, too, she said, but it seemed to me the Earl didn't altogether like that, and I imagined he was prolonging his stay in hope of finding the pearls and claiming them himself.

"You know, Helen," I said, at last, as she was excavating a broad window seat just behind me, and throwing things all about, "when I get around to it, I'll find those pearls for you."

"Do you know where they are?"

"I think so. Or rather, I think it will come to me where they are, when I can put my mind on it. At present, I'm busy."

"You're bumptious and conceited," she returned, sitting on the floor and looking up at me, "but if you think you can find them, I think you ought to do it at once. How do you know the burglar didn't take them?"

"What burglar?"

"The one who killed Marybelle, of course."

"Killed her in order to steal the pearls?"

"Of course. What other motive could anybody have had for murder?"

"Inheritance," I said, looking at her squarely.

"Inheritance? From Marybelle? Oh, do you mean Vida?"

"Vida! Kill her mistress for two thousand dollars. Oh, she doesn't seem that sort. Vida is truly distressed at Marybelle's death."

"But who, then? Janet? Spears?"

"Nonsense! Who benefited most by the will?"

"Why, me and Frank. You don't mean us, do you?"

Helen didn't show indignation so much as a nervous hilarity. It was a strained little laugh she gave, and she said quickly, "Don't talk nonsense! Of course, if it was murder, nobody in the house did it."

"But nobody out of the house *could* have done it."

"Then we must come back to Cissy's ghost. Mr. Prall, did you ever think that Cissy might have done it? Oh, I don't mean of her own volition, but under influence—hypnotism or something, at the hands of these occult people she has dealings with."

"Has dealings with?" I repeated, blankly. I find these blank repetitions useful in drawing people on.

"Yes; you know she's always going to séances and 'sittings' as they call them. And the mediums fool her, I know."

"Fool her?"

"Yes. She has lots of money, and they get large sums away from her——"

"What are her people thinking of!"

"She hasn't any people but her father, and he's always off skylarking. Cissy does as she likes. Well, suppose these mediums hypnotized Cissy to go into Marybelle's room and steal the pearls and turn on the gas—and Cissy never knowing she did it at all!"

"But how did she get into Marybelle's room?"

"Suppose she tapped at the door, say at three or four o'clock, and Marybelle let her in. And suppose she managed to steal the pearls and turn on the gas without Marybelle's knowing it——"

"But if Cissy were hypnotized, Marybelle would know it."

"Oh, well, I don't know about the details. You're the one to find those out. But suppose, then, that Marybelle was asleep when Cissy went in, and Cissy turned on the gas——"

"How did she reach it?"

"Well," and Helen looked wise, "there's a crook-handled umbrella in the closet."

"Let me see it!" I demanded.

Helen went to the closet and produced an umbrella with the frequently seen J-shaped handle.

"Turn on the gas with that," I directed.

But try as she would, Helen couldn't do it. The crook bent around too far. Had it been

shaped like a letter L it might have worked, but not as it was.

"Nothing doing," I said; "but is there an L-shaped umbrella handle in the house?"

Thorough search revealed one in the Earl's room, but it was a little too absurd to imagine him killing his own sweetheart!

"Unless he wanted the pearls back again," suggested Helen.

"Wanted fiddlesticks!" I exclaimed. "If he regretted his gift, he could have retrieved it without crime!"

"I suppose so," said Helen. And sighing in a futile fashion, she went away.

Now you see why I liked to talk about the case. It gave me no real help, but it gave me new ideas, odd hints, that might be of value. Cissy hypnotized! Gas turned on by a crook-handled umbrella! At least these things must go into my tabulated records. They did.

Then the Earl strolled in. I asked him about the umbrella idea, and he stroked his mustache thoughtfully. Pulled at it, rather, the way Englishmen do, in fiction and out. Fairly jerked at it, in fact, as he said, "Too clever by half for mere imagination! Has Mrs. Wesley a crook-handled umbrella or did she borrow mine?"

Here was a moil! Harringdean suspected Helen Wesley of the method Helen had at-

tributed to Cissy! Were all the inmates of the household ready to fly at each other's throats? I wondered if anybody suspected me. My room was directly over Marybelle's!

Well, it seemed the Earl did suspect the two Wesleys. He was nice about it, but he confided to me that he thought it must be they, for they were so glad to get the house and the money. Also, he felt sure they had secreted the pearls, for otherwise they would have been found ere this. He knew, he said, that Marybelle couldn't have hidden them in any way which would have prevented their being found after such desperate search.

I was tempted to stop then and there and hunt up those pearls. But I was on a glimmer of a hint of a shadow of a clue, and I didn't want to interrupt myself.

Suppose, I thought, somebody had turned off the gas entirely at the main in the cellar. And suppose the same person had secretly—say, in the afternoon—opened the jet in Marybelle's room. And then, suppose, late at night, or, rather, early in the morning—for the doctor had said the gas had been turned on not later than four o'clock—the same fiend in human shape had crept down cellar and turned on the main again. It would escape nowhere else but at that one burner. I went to see about this.

"It was this way, sir," Mrs. Blum responded to my discreet questioning; "I cooked all the dinner on the gas range, except the roast. Them ovens is good enough for a cheefe, but the coal range for boilin' er steamin' is—oh, lawks! So I uses the gas range allus, and most satusfactry it is, yus, sir."

"But you turned it off after dinner?" I inquired eagerly.

"I did that, sir."

"And no gas was used, of course, during the evening or night."

"Well, wasn't there just! 'Twas that cold, sir, that us servantses nigh froze. And lots of us, me and Vida, anyway, and Spears, that I know of, we had our snug little gas stoves a-goin' in our bedrooms."

"And these were turned off, say, about midnight?"

"Not mine, sir. I kep' that thing trun on full all night long. An' in the mornin' my room was warm as a toast! It's some *ex*-pense, yes, sir, but Mis' Moss, the dear lydy, she never begridged us a mossel o' heat."

I left her, my bubble burst, my air-castle in ruins! If the gas burned in her room all night, there was no chance for the theory I had formed. I thought perhaps the woman lied; but other servants corroborated the tale, so I gave up that idea.

CHAPTER VI

SIX SIDES TO A ROOM

UNABASHED, undismayed, and even unruffled, I went back to my thinking chair. To say I pondered, faintly expresses it. I thought deeply, I cogitated, I meditated, I speculated, I ruminated, I did all the things Peter Mark Roget could suggest or recommend. I even cudgeled my brains, ransacked my mind and fell into a brown study.

Oh, yes, I know Friend Holmes would have looked at the tipless gas burner and at once have given his versatile portrait of the murderer as a cross-eyed man, eight feet high, smoking a Trichinopoli cigar. But, the cigar aroma was lost in the gas fumes, no man is eight feet high, and cross-eyedness had nothing to do with the case.

But there was one clue, good enough for even that 'stute fish, Sherlock. That was the moonstone ring. Shades of Wilkie Collins! I must deduce something from that ring or write myself down a very long-eared donkey. First, then, why was the ring on the gas burner? Not for safekeeping or to hide it from

burglars. The ring was not valuable; the moonstone is but a semi-precious gem, something less than semi, in my estimation; and though it was well set, it was not in finely wrought gold or faceted platinum.

But it might have been of a special personal value to Marybelle. I must find out. I went to Helen Wesley first. She said she did not think she had ever seen the ring before. However, that was not strange, as she saw Marybelle only once a year or so, and it was not a dinner ring. Doubtless she had had it as a girl; it was a schoolgirl looking affair, she thought.

Then I tackled the Earl. No, he had not given Marybelle that ring. He had never seen it until at the inquest. By the way, he had given her an emerald engagement ring. Had that been cared for?

"Good gracious," I exclaimed, pettishly, "why don't you look after these jewelry matters? If it wasn't buried with her, doubtless Mrs. Wesley has it."

"Probably," sighed the Earl. He seemed resigned to losing all his interests in such properties, and to be sure, they did not belong to him. Marybelle's possessions were now Helen's and there was an end on't.

I met Janet Field in the hall and asked her about the moonstone ring.

"I never saw Marybelle wear it," she said, thoughtfully. "But, of course, she had jewelry and trinkets that I didn't know of; why don't you ask Vida?"

I did, and the maid declared it was not her mistress's ring at all.

"But, no!" she exclaimed, "I am pos'tive—ah, but *pos'tive!* Madame never owned that ring! I should have known it, so. All Madame's jewels I know. I clean them, I arrange them, and I help her sometimes to hide them. But that bauble? No, never was it Madame's."

"But, Vida, how could it possibly get on the gas fixture? Who except a lunatic would climb up and put it there?'"

Vida shuddered. "It was the w'at you call? the polterre ghaist! Yes, but that is who it was! Miss Carreau, she is right! No human hand wore that ring! No human hand put it on the high gas! It was the hand of the evil spirit, the wicked ghaist. He left his ring on the gas! His hand turned the jet, from the finger of that hand came the ring, the moonstone ring—as a token—as a sign ——" With a scream, Vida flung up her hands and ran away.

"H'm," thought I to myself, as I returned to my pondering; "more hysterical women! More *Poltergeist!* I wish I did believe in

the supernatural! It would work out so beautifully. The yellow hand—the Hand of Revenge, Cissy called it—turning on the death-dealing gas and then leaving a ring from its finger as a sign manual. Sign manual is good!" I smiled at my own unintentional *bon mot.*

"What did Vida say?" asked Janet Field, stopping at my door, a few moments later.

"Come in," I said. "Sit down." She did, and I told her what the maid had said, and also how I wished I could feel that the problem was thus solved.

"A sign manual," she repeated as I adroitly brought in my clever phrase. "Doesn't that mean the sign of the hand?"

"In a way, yes. And if the hand of revenge brought about Marybelle's death, the ring was left in evidence."

"How you talk!" Janet shuddered. "Why don't you drop that ghost foolishness and find out something real?"

"Well, listen, then, while I sum up. As I make it, five theories may be tenable. Accident, suicide——"

"Oh, she never——"

"Wait a minute, please. Five theories, I said. Accident, suicide, murder, *Poltergeist,* and hypnotism. The first we all agree is impossible. The second, none of us believes

after reading her letters and Diary. *Poltergeist* is rubbish, isn't it?"

"I suppose so."

"Hypnotism equally so?"

"I don't know. Hypnotism is a very real thing."

"Yes, but granted your hypnotized murderer, how could he get in?"

"True enough, but how could an unhypnotized murderer get in?"

"I don't know. That is my problem. But I contend it is easier for a clever, wide-awake villain to pass through the eye of a needle than an unconscious sleepwalker. By the way, did Marybelle ever walk in her sleep?"

"Not that I know of. Would that open up a new theory?"

"It might. Though I don't see how she could sleepwalk in any way to reach that chandelier."

"Nor I."

"Look here, Miss Field—" Janet was a good listener—"suppose the murderer was concealed in the room, say, from dusk on, or from dinner time on——"

"Yes," prompted Janet, eagerly waiting.

"And suppose he stayed concealed—— But would Marybelle hunt for burglars?"

"No, she wasn't that sort. And she was a

bit near-sighted, you know. She wouldn't see your intruder. Go on."

"Well, and suppose, at four o'clock he, being a very tall man, or having a crooked umbrella or other implement, turned on the gas and softly got away——"

"Yes?"

"Oh *I* don't know *how* he locked the door behind him, any more than you do! Do stop looking triumphant over that point! Nobody knows how he locked the door behind him! But I'm going to find out!"

"Perhaps you will, Mr. Prall," and Janet looked reproved. "But I think——"

"What do you think?" I demanded, as she hesitated.

"I am not superstitious," she went on slowly, "but I can see no possible solution but the—what was the phrase—the Hand of Revenge."

She went away, and I devoted fully ten precious minutes to consideration of the supernatural as a death-dealing instrument. And I couldn't make myself believe in it, so I gave it up. I came back to thoughts of the practical and the material. I pondered even more deeply than before. I had a genius for detection. Was my genius going to fail me? No, I knew it was not! But when, oh, when would it get to burning?

I remembered that Lowell declared that

Poe had two of the prime qualities of genius: "A faculty of vigorous yet minute analysis and a wonderful fecundity of imagination."

H'm! My genius should show those two qualities also. Moreover, it should begin to exhibit them right away!

I looked around the room with a gaze of vigorous yet minute analysis. I divided it into its six sides. I mean, the ceiling, floor and four walls. I reconstructed the scenes of that night. With wonderful fecundity of imagination, I saw Marybelle, happily writing her letters, confiding to her diary, laying out her riding-habit for next day, hiding her pearl necklace, locking and bolting doors and windows, and finally switching off the electric lights and lying down with a smiling face and anticipation of happy dreams.

And then, in through one of those six sides came the murderer, who turned on the fateful gas, and went away as he had come. Was it through floor, ceiling, or one of the four walls? Two walls had doors, two had windows; floor and ceiling had no apertures. Yet through one of the six sides of the cube the murderer had entered, and I should discover which. My problem was here. I fairly hugged it to my breast. There was no entrance, yet entrance was made. There was no clue, yet clue should be found. Some hu-

man hand had turned on that gas. Human? Yes, I believed it human; no ghost had wished harm to our Marybelle.

Another observation of Lowell's came to my mind.

"Genius finds its expression in the establishment of a perfect mutual understanding between the worker and his material."

Ah! So? My material lay within those six plane surfaces. Between it and myself I must establish a perfect mutual understanding.

I did.

CHAPTER VII

THE MISSING NECKLACE

TO PLUCK out the heart of a mystery is a direct statement in form. But in its accomplishment, how indirect! How complicated and intricate. It is not done with the simplicity of plucking a water lily from its home pond, rather it is like getting at the innermost one of those Chinese carved balls, referred to by Tennyson as, "Laborious Orient ivory, sphere in sphere." And since it could only be come at by a perfect mutual understanding between me and my material, I must get about establishing said understanding at once.

The best way, I opined, was to ask questions of my material. Being a man of few words, I concluded to ask but three. Like the three wishes of fairy-tale lore, the answers to my queries would be all I wished or needed. If my material would tell me truly these things: How? Why? And Who? the mystery would be a thing of the past. So, with confidence, I inquired of my material as to the method, the motive and the criminal, and as mutual un-

derstanding became perfected, the answers were forthcoming.

My material was the room I was in. The six sides of that cube and their contents must answer my three questions.

Practically living in that room, as I did, had given me an added impetus in my work. Every dainty belonging of Marybelle's, every cherished souvenir, every personal possession, from the furs in her wardrobe to the soap in her bathroom, were so many mute appeals for vengeance on the wretch who had with one turn of his hand blotted out that young life. The Hand of Fate, indeed! A sad fate for a prospective bride, for one who stood with open hands, welcoming a new life.

I had heard more or less, of late, about Marybelle's selfishness, about her heartless treatment of Bradley Moss, and his untimely death from tuberculosis; but I had never known the man; and I had known Marybelle, beautiful, seductive Marybelle.

I was determined to avenge her death. And this, with my interest in my perfect mystery problem, gave me an energy that must lead to success.

The police detectives were still working on the case, but half-heartedly and tied-handedly. They had no material with which to have a perfect mutual understanding; or, rather,

what lay before their eyes they couldn't see as material. But, dissatisfied with the coroner's verdict, they were still puttering around the mystery.

"I think I have it," said Weldon, coming in to see me, and dropping into a chair, with the intelligent aspect of a feeble-minded jellyfish. "It was that little Carreau girl. I've suspected her from the first, because she is the only one who knew that Mrs. Moss had the new pearl necklace."

"Miss Carreau!"

"Yes. And she trumped up her ghost stories to cover her own crime, and threw hysterics whenever she was questioned, to avoid answering."

"Um. And how did she reach the gas?"

"With an umbrella or cane or broomstick or any such thing. Maybe she had a yardstick or——"

"Or a tape measure!" I exploded. I did hate to have poor little innocent Cissy accused. "And just how did Miss Carreau enter the room and also make exit, leaving the place barricaded as if for a siege?"

"That I haven't quite worked out yet."

"Well, go and get to work on it, and don't come to bother me again until you do. Understand, Mr. Weldon, this is a perfect mystery problem. Generally, the criminal leaves

some overlooked clue, some forgotten precaution, but in this instance, there isn't a trace. As a problem, it has no flaw. I am busy solving it. And I must ask you to do *your* solving to yourself. First must be discovered how the murderer got into and out of the room. Until you know that, for a certainty, you have made no progress, and any time I spend with you is wasted."

I hated to score the poor fellow so, but he was, it seemed, a jellyfish with an armadillo's skin, for he only said, "I suppose so, Mr. Prall," and went away.

I began on my material. The ceiling first; I went over it inch by inch, but found nothing but what any well-conducted ceiling would show. There was no torn paper or broken plaster. No cracks or scalings in its kalsomined surface. The ornate plaster centerpiece from which the chandelier hung was intact and perfect. The chandelier itself, an elaborate affair, had eight brackets made of brass tubing bent in curlicued pattern and eight gas burners with the usual ground glass globes. The electric fixtures had been added below these burners and hung down, with pink shades over their bulbs.

As the room above was the one I had occupied on the night of the tragedy, I had no suspicion of a trapdoor to that, and indeed there

was no chance of such a thing. So the ceiling was dismissed from my mind as affording possible entrance to the intruder.

The floor, next, proved equally innocent. I looked under the rugs, I moved all the furniture, and I tapped around the mopboard, till I was sure nobody, not even a mouse, could have come up through the floor.

Each wall I took separately, and found no openings or apertures even the tiniest, save the doors and windows. There was no ventilator or transom. With the aid of the step-ladder I scanned the tops of the windows and doors, the curtain poles and fixtures, and the entire chandelier. There was nothing, *nothing* in the least indicative of recent disturbance or suggestive of a way to look for the truth.

Then I attacked the doors and windows themselves. I thought of the murderer sawing out and replacing a door panel. No, I don't mean that he sawed it at the time, but suppose he had sawed it out the day before and replaced it with temporary tacks. Then, at the moment, he had removed the panel, unlocked and unbolted the door, entered, turned on the gas by means of an ordinary lighter, and, going softly out, relocked the door as he had opened it, and replaced the panel.

A fine theory, but both doors disproved it. They were so positively as they had been for

years that it was clear to be seen nobody had used that dodge. They were of pine or some such wood, stained and grained to represent black walnut. Our forefathers had placed strong reliance on the credulity of their fellow men. Each stained his own doors, assuming his neighbors would think them the real thing, knowing full well that the neighbors also stained their own.

I had a similar theory ready for the windows. How about entering one of those by means of a long ladder, and by the method of removing a pane of glass and afterward replacing it with putty? But the windows understood me and denied this, proving it by their untouched and adamant putty. Hard as concrete and weather-beaten, the putty of every pane had not been disturbed since a glazier's fingers left it many years ago. This was indisputable, I saw at once, so I raised no dispute with that bit of material.

And so I proceeded. I was in no haste. Rather, I was spinning out this solving process as a child spins out the enjoyment of his ice cream, making it last as long as possible. But I was thorough. Aye, more than thorough. I was meticulous. I looked behind every picture on the walls, every mirror, and every bit of foolish artcraft that conscientiously covered its own allotted portion of

wallpaper. The wallpaper was, to my mind, hideous. It was of recent date, thus jarring with woodwork and window panes. The design was gay hued parrots disporting in tropical foliage on a dark background. But I looked over every parrot and every burst of orchid-like bloom, without getting a breath of inspiration. The furniture I nearly tore apart in my earnestness of search. As I had been told, Marybelle had ingeniously bored long auger holes in some chair legs, and in one desk leg, stopping them with ordinary corks, stained dark. What a woman! The jewels she had hidden in these receptacles had been taken away, by Helen, probably; but I cared naught. They would be of no help to me.

I looked for trick locks on doors or windows. There were none. I looked up the chimney. It was too small for navigation; also it was full of soot, and the room had been found immaculately clean. No one had entered that way. Of course, I subjected the bathroom to the same processes as the bedroom. I went over the floor on my hands and knees. I went along the walls, my nose not an inch from the parrots and magnolias. I gazed at the ceiling as raptly as ever a star-gazer looked heavenward, and I stared at that chandelier for hours at a time.

I did not blame my material for lack of re-

sults. No, I knew that the perfect understanding was already theirs, and if not yet quite mutual, it soon would be.

Being in a hunting mood, I determined to look for the pearls. There were few places to look, for Helen had riddled the place with her probing search. I ignored obvious places and quested for the obscure.

I bethought me of the delightful old story of the lost horse. A country lad found him, after long search had failed. "How did you find him?" they asked. And the yokel replied, "Why, I thought if I was a horse, where would I go? And I went there, and he had."

That was the method I chose to find the necklace. I thought, if I were Marybelle, where would I put it?

And as I thought, so far as possible, with her mind, I seemed to be impelled to secrete it somewhere in or near the bed. But the bedclothes had been taken away and others substituted. Still, there were the mattresses. I deduced a hiding place in one of these and scrutinized the edges for a place that might have been ripped and re-sewn. There were none. Now, pearls couldn't be introduced into a mattress without some such procedure, so I decided against it. There were the pillows, but these, too, showed only their original seams.

Ah, the *lingerie* pillows! There were half a dozen or more of the daintiest of boudoir pillows, the slips being of fine embroidery or lace or both, and the pillows being covered with rose-colored satin.

Eagerly I examined the edges of the satin pillows. Though far from being what is known as a Miss Nancy, I did know that such pillows are made by being stitched nearly all the way round, and sewn for a few inches, after being filled with down.

My somewhat domestic knowledge stood me in good stead. One pillow, after looking at several, I found had been ripped and hastily resown. I felt pinchingly, and found a hard bunch within, which I knew at once was the necklace. I took the pillow to Helen and let her rip it out. She cried out with delight, exclaiming, "What a place to hide them! And isn't that just like Marybelle!"

It was a fine string of pearls, not worth a king's ransom, but worth enough to cheer the heart of any woman; and Helen was duly elated.

"How did you find them?" she asked me, her eyes glued to the lustrous gems.

"Oh, I just went there, and she had," I replied, carelessly. "Now I'm going to find the murderer."

I left Helen resewing the satin pillow, for

she was a housewifely sort, and returned to my post.

I had found the pearls by sheer mental process, so I kept at that exercise. I thought and thought until—well, I wondered if I'd be like the Little Shmall Rid Hin. You know, "she thaught and thaught till she became so thin, that there was nawthin' left of her but jist her bones and shkin."

I thought of a murderer entering at dusk, and remaining hidden in wardrobe or closet —for poor Marybelle was so near-sighted— until four o'clock, turning on the gas, and then—well, making an exit during the commotion that followed the discovery of the tragedy. Could it have been? But reason told me, no. There were too many of us at or near the door for any stranger to escape unnoticed. But if not a stranger? Suppose—well, say, one of the household servants had done this, and in the excitement had stepped from his hiding place and mingled with the rest of us

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No. Any servant absent from duty all night would have been noticed and reported. Any guest, then? Cissy? She could have gone in before Marybelle retired, could have pretended to go out, but really have hidden, and stayed there; then when we raised the alarm, she might have——. Bah, what rub-

bish! Little Cissy in there all those long hours! Any one who had done anything like that would have died of the gas, too! Truly, I was getting in my dotage!

I concluded I had cobwebs on the brain, and started out for a walk in the cold, crisp air, hoping the winter winds would blow them all away. I went to the police and asked the loan of the ring that had been found on the gas burner. Having but one real dressy clue, I determined to give it its fair share of attention.

I got the ring, the police having a sort of grudging admiration for me, not unmixed with a certain satisfaction in my lack of achievement so far.

"It is circumstantial evidence," Blair said impressively, "and you can't hang a man on circumstantial evidence, remember."

The ring wasn't a circumstance to my detective talent, and I had no man to hang anyway, so I gave him no reply but a civil good-day, and went my way.

CHAPTER VIII

FOOTSTEPS IN THE NIGHT

BACK home again, aye, even on the way home, I studied the ring. It told me nothing, save its mere surface facts. It was a lady's ring. That is, its size made it appear so, and its general timidity of aspect. Surely no man would wear that bauble, even on his little finger. Well, that didn't prove a lady had murdered Marybelle. Besides, that ring might have been on that burner for years. Maybe Marybelle's mother had put it there for some absurd reason. Maybe the long yellow hand, that figured in Marybelle's tale of her mother's nightmare (though I really believed that creeping hand was merely the figment of a bad dream), had put the ring on the gas, and perhaps had returned for its forgotten property and accidentally turned on the jet.

This theory was so ingenious that I repeated it to Janet Field, she being the first listener I found on my return to the house.

"Oh, don't," she said, shuddering. "Mr. Prall, when you are really a clever detective,

why do you stoop to that unpleasant sort of foolery?"

"But look at the ring," I said. "It's not such a one as Marybelle would own, is it now?"

"I don't want to touch it," she said, backing off. "It seems to me haunted!"

But Herringdean came along then, and he took the ring and examined it.

"Oligoclase," he said, as he returned it.

"Abracadabra—Erin go bragh," I returned politely, not wishing to be outdone in unintelligibility.

He smiled. "That's what a moonstone is," he explained. "It belongs in part to a variety of orthoclase called adularia, but in part also to albite or oligoclase."

"Thank you so much!" I said fervently. "I've long wanted to know."

Then we talked of the pearls. Herringdean said nothing about wanting them, for Helen had given him to understand that the residuary legatee would take everything not nailed down by the will.

"Marybelle was so pleased with them," said his lordship reminiscently. "She was like a child when she was pleased. She was a dear nature, so warmly sympathetic and so responsive in her emotions. You loved her, Miss Field?"

"I fell under Marybelle's charm four years

ago," replied Janet simply. "She was very good to me, and took me into her heart and home."

"You were her social secretary?"

"So-called, but more of a companion and general helper. The first year I lived with her, we were like sisters. Then, when she married, she did not need me."

"But widowed, she was glad to have you with her again?"

"Yes, Lord Herringdean; she urged me to come to her, soon after Mr. Moss died."

I left the two talking and strolled away. I met Vida in the upper hall, dusting about, as housemaids will. I showed her the ring and asked her again if she could not remember ever having seen it.

"Never," she insisted. "Madame would not own such junket or w'at you call it. And I have never before seen it, no."

"Vida," I said, suddenly, "you have not told me all you know of that—that night of Madame's death. Tell me the rest now."

It was a chance shot. I only said it because the girl looked perturbed and—well, as if she had a secret and yearned to share it.

"But, no, I know nothing!"

"Yes, you do, out with it!"

"Well, then, it is but this. I saw Miss Field sitting on the stairs."

"Miss Field! Sitting on the stairs?"

As I have said, to repeat a statement blankly, is the surest way to get amplification thereof.

"Yes, sir. She sat on the stairs, motionless, at four o'clock of the morning."

"Four o'clock! Miss Janet? You're crazy!"

"But no, I have not the craze. I come from my room, which is on the floor above, and as I am cold, I go to the hall cupboard for another blanket. It is permitted we do this if cold. Then, as I leave my door, I see Miss Field sit on the stair, five, six steps from the top. I slip back to my room and she does not see me. When I peep forth again, she is gone."

"Look here, Vida, I believe in your honesty, but I think you are mistaken. Come with me, and we will ask Miss Field. She is in the library now."

"Oh, I like not that!"

"I didn't ask you of your preferences; I said, come with me."

Unwillingly Vida went with me, and I took her straight to the library where Janet and Lord Herringdean were still sitting, talking.

"Miss Field," I began straightway, for this might be a piece of my material and I mustn't miss a chance. "Vida says you were sitting

on the stairs the night, the morning, rather, of Marybelle's death."

"Yes," said Janet gravely, "I was."

Lord Herringdean gave a little exclamation of astonishment, and I went on, "At four o'clock," Vida says.

"Yes, about four," agreed Janet. "I thought I heard someone moving about downstairs and I went out to look down."

"A burglar, do you mean?"

"That I couldn't say. But, you must know, Mr. Prall, my hearing is very acute, perhaps abnormally so, and I can hear very faint sounds even at a distance. So, when I thought I heard an intruder, I stepped out to the hall and listened. As to sitting on the stairs—" she smiled a little—"that is atavism. I have Indian blood in my veins, North American Indian, I mean, and by putting my ear to the wall, or to the ground, I can hear marvelously. I sat down and put my ear against the wall, and I did hear somebody moving about down here in the library."

"It was I," Lord Herringdean flung back his head and looked defiant. "I was kept awake by those confounded—I beg your pardon, by those annoying ghost stories the girls told. I am foolishly sensitive to such matters, and when I tried to sleep, I seemed to see that long, yellow hand, creeping—creeping—well,

I simply couldn't stand it. I got the jumps and I came downstairs to see if I could get a peg of brandy from the sideboard. But there was nothing of the sort about, so I wandered in here and tried to read. I couldn't bear to go to bed again and see those wretched spook visions."

"I thought it was you, Lord Herringdean," said Janet, fixing her dark eyes on his face. "Had I known what you wanted, I would have called Spears to look after you. But I assumed you were wakeful and wanted to read; and having satisfied myself there was no burglar, I returned to my room. I saw you, Vida, when you peeped out at your door, but I didn't speak, lest we waken some sleeper."

"Oh, Miss Field, I'm glad to know all. I wondered why you sat on the stair. Now I know."

"And you know why I was prowling about," said Herringdean. "I've wondered whether I oughtn't to mention it, but there seemed no need, so I didn't."

"But," said I eagerly, "if that was the very hour that some marauder did come in and turned on the gas that killed poor Marybelle, you ought to have caught a glimpse of him, Herringdean."

"I didn't see anybody, nor did I hear any sound."

"Did you, Miss Field?"

"No unexpected or unexplainable sound. I heard Lord Herringdean moving about, and I heard Vida, as she came into the hall and went back to her room."

"As you sat on the stairs you were right against the wall of Marybelle's room—" I said, thinking aloud, rather than inquiring.

"Yes," and Janet's big, dark eyes were full of grief. "I could hear her breathe, her asthma, you know, made her breathing audible, and my hearing is so acute."

"You heard no other sound in her room?"

"Absolutely none. Had there been, rest assured I should have heard it."

"And this was at four o'clock?"

"About that," said Janet. "I glanced at my watch on my return to my room and it was a few minutes after four. As I had satisfied myself that the sound I heard was Lord Herringdean, I had no further anxiety on the subject."

"To think," exclaimed the Earl, "that you sat there, by the wall of that room, while Marybelle was being murdered!"

"We can't be sure of that," I said. "The doctor couldn't place the turning on of the gas definitely to the minute, it may have been done after Miss Field returned to her room."

"Or before I left it," added Janet.

"Yes," I agreed.

We were all silent for a moment, thinking of the strange situation: the Earl in the library on the first floor, Vida in the hall on the third floor, Janet on the stairs between the second and third floors, and Marybelle in her bedroom on the second floor, perhaps at that very moment the victim of foul play.

The fact that three people were awake and stirring, made it difficult to see how an intruder could have gone about his dastardly deed. But it was already impossible to see how the deed could have been done, and the story of Janet's vigil on the stairs added but a trifle to the mystery.

"Let us go to Marybelle's room and think it over," I proposed, and we did so.

"Now," said I, "let us three people be absolutely frank and honest and say what we really think."

"I shall be glad to!" Herringdean burst out. "I've tried to keep it back, but I'd like to put on record that I believe Marybelle's death was in some mysterious fashion brought about by Mr. and Mrs. Wesley, or both."

Janet looked at him in horror. Her great black eyes seemed to accuse him of wickedness almost equal to the crime itself. She was about to speak, but I interrupted. "Why, and how?" I asked.

"Why? To get possession of the fortune coming to them at her death. They knew her marriage to me would doubtless deprive them of their expected inheritance. How? The means we have not yet discovered, but their room is next this, and some diabolical contrivance was used that defies detection."

The Earl was very much in earnest. Evidently he had long wanted to express his suspicions, but had controlled himself, until I invited frank speech.

"You are wrong, Lord Herringdean," said Janet, and her quiet tones were emphasized by a vibration of intense conviction. "It is impossible. I know the Wesleys better than you do, and they are incapable of such a thought as crime in order to win a fortune. Please never hint such a thing again, unless you have some shadow of proof or some suggestion as to how they could have accomplished it."

"They had motive and opportunity," I began, but Janet cried out, "Opportunity! What do you mean?"

"Only that they occupied the next room, and no one else was as near. As Lord Herringdean says, suppose some diabolical contrivance, introduced, say, through the open bathroom window—their bathroom is next, you know—perhaps a long, jointed fishing rod, inserted——"

Janet looked incredulous. "A fishing rod that would come in at the window, turn round a corner and reach the gas to turn it on?"

It did sound absurd; and as we looked at the distance and the devious directions it must take we were forced to discard the fishing-rod theory.

"But something like that," persisted the Earl.

We talked a long time in this vein. We suggested and riddled some ingenious theories, and at last my two visitors left me to brood alone.

CHAPTER IX

TRAILED!

AND brood I did. Started on the fishpole track, I devised a pliable affair, of finely tempered steel, that could be insinuated and could finally reach the gas jet. Could force enough be exerted to turn the key at that distance? No? Well, then, a magnet on its end, that should pull the key around! Fine, as an example of a fecund imagination, but utterly impracticable, as a glance out of the window in question showed me. Then, I advised myself, the same contrivance put through a hole in the wall. But though I examined the wall between the two rooms, inch by inch, even atom by atom, there was no hole through it. The parrots blinked back at me and I could almost hear their words of jeering scorn that I could not find out what they had silently witnessed.

"Tell me," I cried, "you grinning wretches! You saw the crime committed, tell me how, why, who? How? Why? Who?"

I sounded like an owl. And as I realized it, I said angrily, "Don't tell, then! The owl

is a wiser bird than a silly parrot, and I will find out for myself!"

I sat down in my thinking chair. I took from my pocket the ring, the moonstone ring.

"This ring holds the secret," I mused. "I'll wrest it from it. Is this ring a sign or a clue or not? If it is, it was placed on that burner by the hand that turned the key."

By aid of the step-ladder, which I kept in the room now, I looked at the burner from which the ring had been taken. It was lightly crusted with rust and dust. It showed a slight scratch (yes, I did use a lens at this juncture. I had to) on one side, bright and new. Doubtless the ring had been slipped there lately, and was not a relic of Marybelle's mother's time.

Here was a start. A tip removed, a ring added, by way of preparation for the deed. This told me, at the moment, only the fact of definite and deliberate preparation. Was it Helen Wesley's ring? But Helen was so matter-of-fact, not at all imaginative. That was more in Cissy's vein.

While up there, I studied the key that had been turned. It was, as a whole, diamond-shaped, with a round bulge on each corner. It was of filigreed brass, in openwork pattern. With my lens I studied the dust in the interstices. I looked sapiently for fingerprints,

when I realized that if I found one it would probably be my own; for when I sprang for the high key and turned it off that morning I naturally gave it a hard dab.

Well, I found no definite print; never did think much of 'em anyway; but I imagined or thought or hoped that I discerned a cleaner hole in one of the corners of the diamond than in any other. The diamond was longer than wide, and in one of the side apexes the hole showed a brighter inside edge than the others. Could there be anything in the fishpole game, after all? But no fishpole could taper small enough to go through that tiny hole and have any strength at all. And, too, there was no hole for it to come through from Wesley's room; and the idea of its possessing the human intelligence to wiggle through the bathroom window and hit unerringly its goal in the corner of the gas burner's key was a little too much to ask.

Of course, I didn't have in mind an ordinary fishpole. I thought vaguely of a willow wand, of a long wire, of a jointed steel rod. Oh, I had a magician's whole paraphernalia in the back of my head!

Yet, nothing could be done with my ideas unless I could find the hole through which the instrument of death had entered the room. I scanned the mopboard all round, the door

frames, looked behind pictures, and at last began feeling for what I could not discern by sight.

I pawed all the walls, punching a smug parrot now and then, to ease my impatience. Suddenly, on the wall next the hall, I felt a depression. It was high up—was going round the room on my step-ladder, feeling at the height of the burner itself—and the wall paper gave a little beneath my fingertips. I felt a queer sensation, and before going further I stepped down and locked the door and returned. I carefully investigated, and found there had been made in the paper a cross-shaped incision, and the flaps were in place, so that the crossed cuts scarcely showed. Carefully I turned back the four tiny triangular flaps, and saw a neat, round, cleancut hole, somewhat smaller in size than a lead pencil.

I saw at once it had been made with Marybelle's auger, and thought, disappointedly, "One more place to hide her jewelry!"

The hole was too small to hold any jewels, unless some small chain or narrow bar pin. And, too, any such thing would have fallen down between the walls. Could it be the hole was for the entrance of my hypothetical fishing-rod? I looked through, but could see no light and concluded it did not go clear through the wall. But I must see. And carefully re-

placing the minute flaps of the wall paper, I went out into the hall.

Just then the luncheon gong sounded.

I stopped the Earl as he went by and said imperatively: "I shall not be at luncheon until later. Keep everybody at the table, until I come. On no account let a single one leave, on any pretext. Detain them by force, if necessary."

He knew from my manner how in earnest I was, and nodding his head he went on downstairs. Silently as possible, I visited every bedroom in the house, searching my final clue. I now knew *How!* I must learn Who and Why.

After trying several rooms I learned *Who.*

The *Why,* I couldn't yet imagine, but the motive would soon appear. It is said there are but two motives for murder: money and revenge. Well, it was doubtless one or the other.

I went downstairs and went first to the cook, Mrs. Blum. She was, in a way, housekeeper also.

"Mrs. Blum," I asked, "who dusts the stairs?"

"Which stairs, sir?"

"Any of them. Say, the flight between the second and third floors."

"Well, sir, housemaids are kittle cattle.

Take the lower flight, now. Norah, the parlor maid, dusts up to the landing, and Vida, the chambermaid, the steps above."

"And the flight above that? It has no halfway landing."

"Well, sir, Vida does the lower half, and Ellen, the second housemaid, the upper. There's a dividing step, I don't know which it is. But *they* know, ah, yes, well they know! And neither gyurl wud touch on the other side of it. Why, sir? Any complaint?"

"No. Call Ellen here."

Ellen came, frightened out of her wits.

"There is no fault to be found with your work, Ellen," I said pleasantly, "but there's a bit of money waiting for you if you think straight and clear and answer one or two questions."

The girl stood quiet and looked composed and sensible. "Yes, sir," she said.

"Think back to the morning that we discovered the death of Mrs. Moss. Did you dust your stairs as usual that morning?"

"Yes, sir."

"Was there any unusual dust or dirt on them?"

"There was, sir, a little."

"Was it——" I whispered the rest, not wanting Mrs. Blum to hear it.

"It was, sir."

I gave her the promised reward and went to the dining room. Those at table were just having coffee served. I took a small cup and declined Helen's solicitous offers of food. When all were finished, I asked that all come with me to Marybelle's room.

"Be seated, please," I said. "I have solved the mystery and I want to tell you about it."

They sat down, Frank and Helen on the edge of the bed, Janet in a little rocker, and the Earl in the straight desk chair. I closed the hall door, and stood by it, scarcely knowing how to begin my sad revelation.

"The method of bringing about the death of Marybelle I have discovered," I said. "And the one who did it, I have spotted. But the motive I do not know. I will show you first how it was done."

I took from a table where I had laid it a long mattress needle, the kind used by upholsterers for tufting mattresses or furniture. Also I took a spool of heavy, dark linen thread, and breaking off a piece about six yards long, I threaded the needle with it. Then I opened the hall door and, stepping outside, brought back a strong, high chair. This I placed directly beneath the gas burner that had been found turned on. I thrust the long needle through the hole in the side of the key, the hole that I had thought seemed less

dusty than the others, and pulled the short end of thread completely through. Then unthreading the needle, I pulled the thread till the lengths were even. Then twisting the two ends of thread tightly together, I threaded both at once through the needle's eye.

Refraining from glancing at the face of any one of my audience, I stepped down from the chair and moved it over till it was directly beneath the hole I had found in the wall of the room, next the hall. Getting on the chair again, I showed them the tiny flaps of paper, turning them back carefully for they were getting worn, and thrust the threaded needle through the hole, leaving it there.

"I will ask that no one moves for a moment," I said, as I stepped down from the chair and went out into the hall.

In a moment, those in the room saw the needle pulled on through and the threads drawn after it until taut.

I sat on the stairs to do this. The needle had come through the wall and through the wooden mopboard that ran up the staircase next the wall. Then, slowly and firmly, I pulled both threads at once, and the watchers in Marybelle's room saw the key of the burner turn slowly as the thread pulled it round. It had stood at right angles to the direction of the thread. Now it was turned till it was in

the same direction and the gas was turned on full.

Then, letting go one end of the thread, I pulled on the other, and the whole length was drawn through the hole in the key, through the hole in the wall, and disappeared from view of those in the room.

I returned and closed the door behind me.

"That is how it was done," I said simply. "An ingenious means, but neither complicated nor difficult. The hole was bored with Marybelle's own auger, perhaps some time before it was used. The thread was strung through, doubtless the night it was used, before Marybelle came up to retire. With her near-sightedness and her low, shaded electric lights she did not notice the thread, which was pulled by the murderer at, the doctor says, about four o'clock."

"Who did it?" said the Earl hoarsely, his face as white as death itself.

"Suppose we ask for a confession," I said, keeping my eyes on the floor lest the face of the criminal unnerve me.

"I will confess," said Janet, in low, even tones. "I am the murderer. May I tell you about it?"

I looked up then, to see Janet Field's face aglow with vivid emotion. She sat upright in her chair, every muscle tense, but with ab-

solute self-control. A red spot showed on either cheek and her black eyes blazed with almost a wild light.

"I killed Marybelle," she said, "in exactly the manner Mr. Prall has shown you. Now, I will tell you why. Nearly four years ago I came to live with Marybelle as companion and secretary. I told her I was engaged to Bradley Moss and wanted to stay with her something less than a year, when I would marry him. Marybelle agreed to this and said I might leave her when I chose. I was very poor, and I wanted to save up my salary for my trousseau.

"Marybelle had never met Bradley until he came here to see me. From the moment she saw him, she planned to steal him away from me. For a time Bradley resisted her charms and was true to me, laughing with me, over the wiles and snares she laid for him. But no man could long hold out against such a woman. She flattered him, she teased him, she tempted him, she lured him with all the powers of her siren nature. She made herself beautiful for him and wove an enchantment that succeeded at last. He came and told me. He was manly and frank. He was sorry beyond all words, but he could not break her thrall and he married her.

"I went away, broken hearted, broken

lived, but willing to forgive them both if she would give him happiness. You, Frank Wesley, know whether she did or not. You know how she tired of him in six months or less, how she made him her puppet, boasting that she could rule his very soul. Then he grew ill, and the doctor ordered him to Arizona. Marybelle refused to let him go, and kept him here, dancing attendance on her, though there was no longer any love on either side. She shed her charms on other men, she was cold and cruel to Bradley. She was unfaithful to him. Yet she made him stay here, until—until he died—killed as surely by her hand as if she had stabbed him with a dagger!

"After his death, she couldn't live alone, and she asked me to come back to her. I came—for this sole and only purpose—revenge!

"I am of Indian descent. My forebears were of the Cherokees, and a vital, an innate trait of my character is revenge—justifiable revenge. And I vowed that in her happiest hour I would kill Marybelle as she killed the man I loved—and so killed *me*. For my life went out when Bradley Moss died. Had Marybelle loved him, had she made his life happy, I should have rejoiced." Janet rose, and stood, a tragic, a dominant figure. Tall,

lithe, strong, she looked the epitome of her Indian tribe. And smouldering in her great, cloud-black eyes was the dull light of a soul's accomplishment of a vow, a life for a life!

"I made it my life-work," she went on. "I planned for it, and I waited the day, which I knew would come, when Marybelle should be on the threshold of the greatest happiness she could desire. It came the night of her engagement to the Earl. I didn't falter, I was in no whit stayed by a thought of pity for her. Indians are not like that. The time had come, that was all. I came up here while some were playing bridge, and I knew where all the others were. There was no chance of failure, but I must do my work perfectly. Bringing in that very hall chair, I stood on it, while I removed the tip from the burner. Then—" Janet's voice faltered a little, her scarlet lips trembled, but she went on—"then, I put on that burner the betrothal ring Bradley had given me. A poor little jewel, but the symbol of our deep, pure perfect love that Marybelle stole away from us. Through that ring, that sign manual of our plighted troth, should flow the fumes that should mete out righteous judgment on the woman who had murdered my beloved.

"In Bradley's name and mine, I put that

ring on the burner, and through it came the death that avenged our wrong. Marybelle killed both our souls, wilfully, knowingly, purposely. Also, she killed Bradley's body, wilfully, knowingly, purposely. She has paid that debt, a life for a life. The murder of our souls, of our happiness, of our hopes, can never be repaid. That is all. I have no regret, no sorrow. I have no care as to what becomes of me. An Indian never forgives or forgets. My life ended when Marybelle stole my love. There is nothing more."

Janet sat again in her chair, relaxed, but not limp. There was a silence. And then she said, in her usual tones, "What am I to do? Tell the authorities?"

"No!" cried Frank Wesley. "This story shall never go beyond these four walls! I forbid it. Here the deed was done, here it has been explained. No one knows but the four walls, no one shall know. You agree with me, Herringdean?"

"I do," said the Earl firmly.

I don't know what became of Janet Field. I left Woodshurst the next day, as my work was accomplished and my connection with the Moss case at an end. I had achieved my desire. I had solved the mystery of a murder committed in an inaccessible room.

I don't suppose any further elucidations are

needed to make all clear to the reader, or to impress him further with my marvelous perspicacity and perspicuity in handling this affair.

Janet had first conceived the idea of her plan by seeing the long, thin auger which Marybelle had bought for the purpose related. One day, when Marybelle and all the servants chanced to be away for the afternoon, Janet had bored the hole, with extreme care and caution. It had begun in the wall at the height of the gas burner and had come out through the baseboard at the sixth step from the top of the stairs. She had carefully removed all plaster that fell and all sawdust on the stair side, and replacing the tiny paper flaps, had bided her time, without fear of discovery. The night that she drew the threads through, she had let fall a slight dust of plaster without knowing it, and this I suspected, after I began to see into the truth. She had pulled the threads at four o'clock that morning, when Vida saw her sitting on the stairs. Her marvelous hearing had let her know just where the Earl was, and also had shown her that Marybelle was sleeping soundly in her bed. Janet's own poise and controlled nature enabled her to answer Vida's inquiries casually, and to turn the suspicion of the situation toward the Earl.

The plan was the concept of a master mind, but I may be pardoned if I add that the solution of the mystery was the achievement of a mind rather more remarkable.

THE END

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